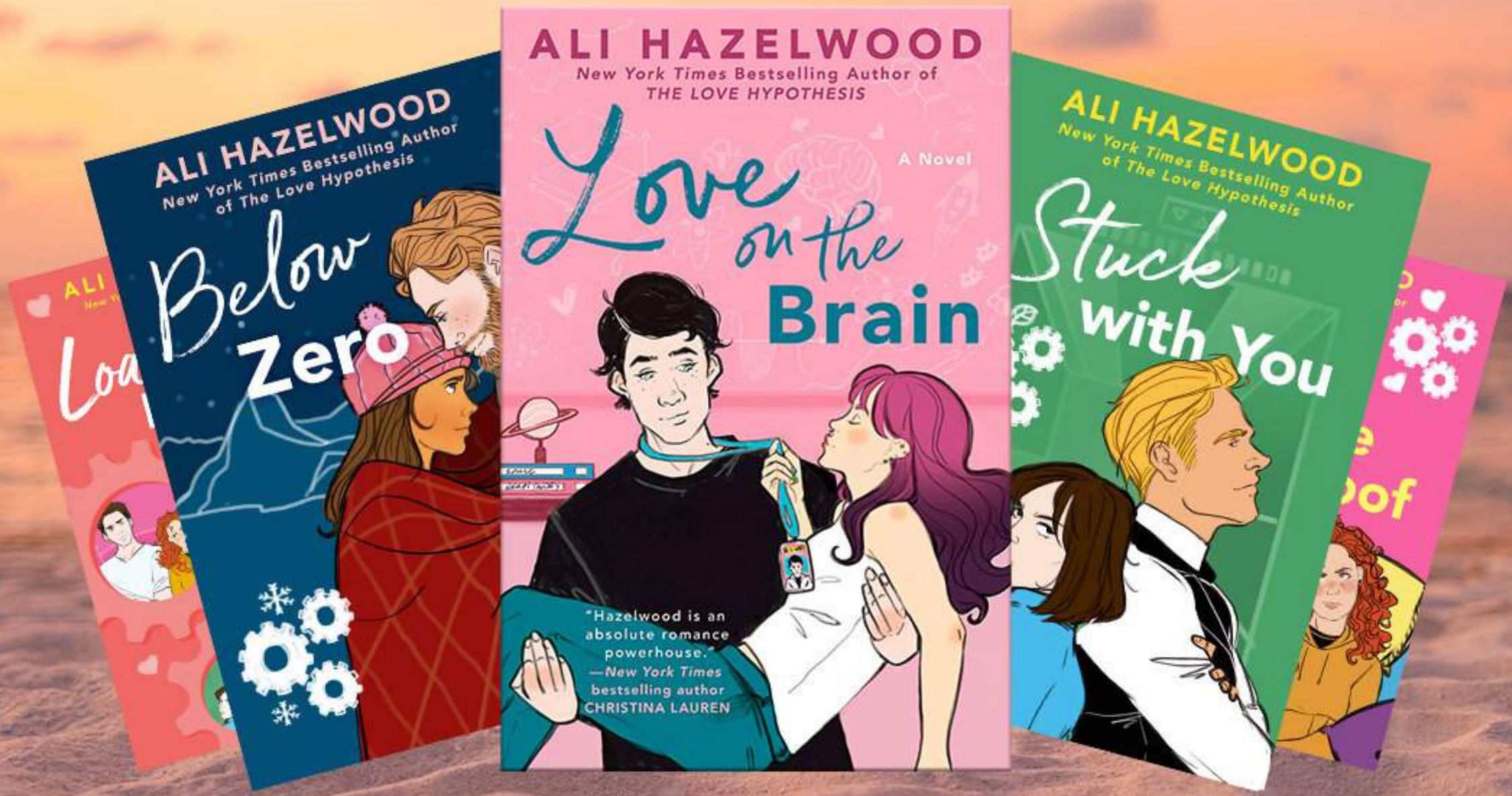
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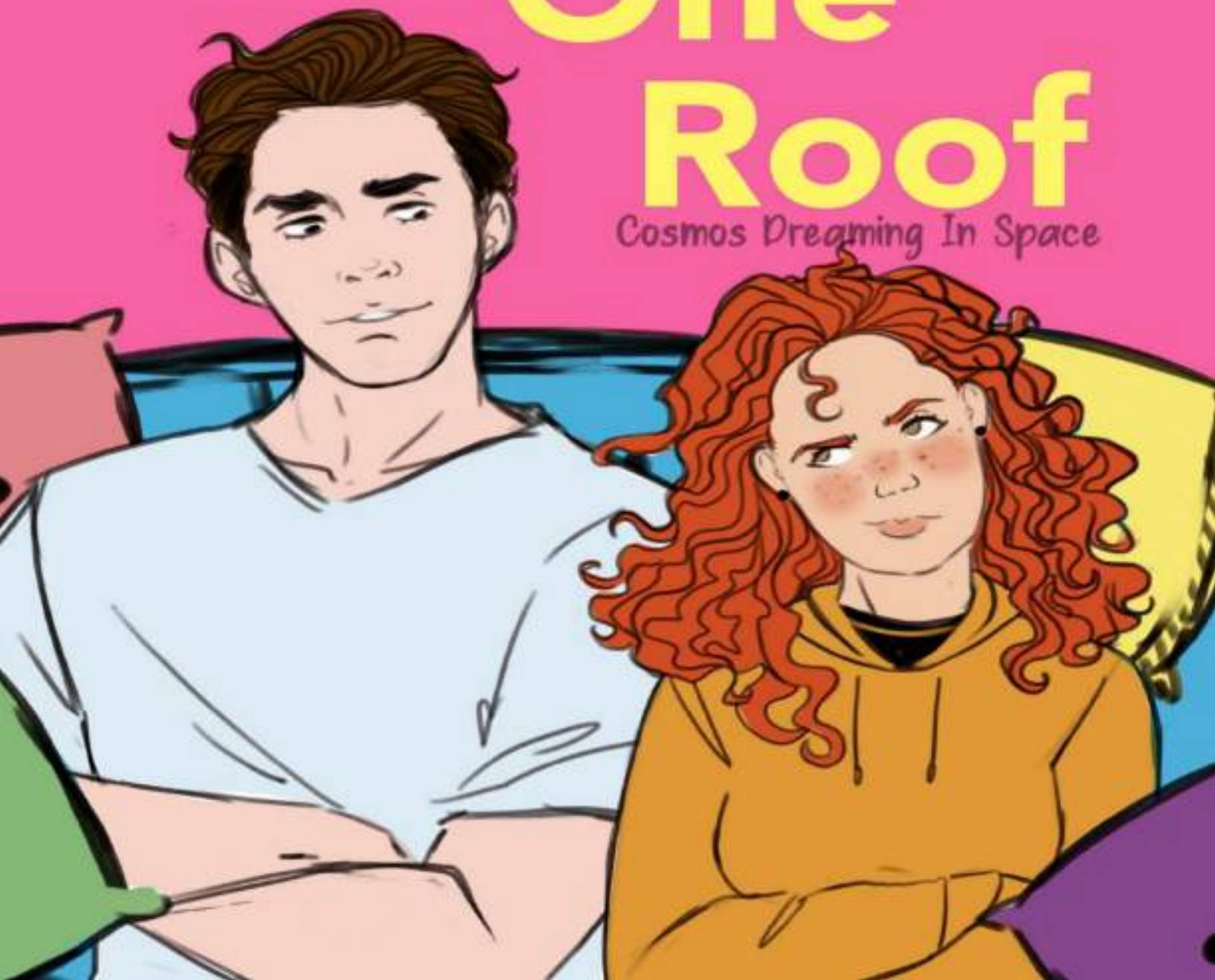
Stuck with You

ALI HAZELWOOD

New York Times Bestselling Author of *The Love Hypothesis*

Under One Roof

Cosmos Dreaming In Space



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Ali Hazelwood

Proximo Libro

Cosmos Dreaming In Space

Staff

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Sinopsis

Una científica nunca debería cohabitar con su némesis irritantemente caliente: conduce a la combustión.

Mara, Sadie y Hannah son amigas primero, científicas siempre. Aunque sus campos de estudio puedan llevarlos a diferentes rincones del mundo, todos pueden estar de acuerdo en esta verdad universal: cuando se trata de amor y ciencia, los opuestos se atraen y los rivales te hacen arder...

Como ingeniera ambiental, Mara sabe todo sobre la delicada naturaleza de los ecosistemas. Requieren equilibrio. Y dejando el termostato solo. Y no robar la comida de otra persona. Y otras reglas de las que Liam, el detestable abogado de su compañero de habitación, no sabe nada. Está bien, claro, técnicamente ella es la intrusa. Liam ya estaba atrincherado en la casa de su tía como un gigante gruñón ceñudo cuando Mara se mudó, con sus grandes músculos y su boca besable simplemente sentado en el sofá tentando a los científicos respetables al lado oscuro... pero Helena era su mentora y Mara no está dispuesta a mudarse, salir y renunciar a su herencia sin pelear.

El problema es que vivir con alguien significa llegar a conocerlo. Y cuanto más descubre Mara sobre Liam, más difícil es odiarlo... y más fácil es amarlo.

Prologo

Presente

Miro la pila de platos en el fregadero y llego a una dolorosa conclusión: lo tengo mal.

En realidad, borra eso. Ya sabía que lo tenía mal. Pero si no lo hubiera sabido, esto sería un claro indicio: el hecho de que no puedo mirar un colador y doce tenedores sucios sin ver los ojos oscuros de Liam mientras se apoya contra el mostrador, con los brazos cruzados sobre el pecho; sin escuchar su voz severa pero burlona preguntándome:

—¿Arte de instalación posmoderno? ¿O simplemente nos quedamos sin jabón?

Usualmente ese momento sucede justo después de haber llegado tarde a casa y darme cuenta de que dejó la luz del porche encendida para mí. Eso… oh, eso siempre hace que mi corazón se acelere de una manera mitad encantadora, mitad desgarradora. ¿Algo que también provoca que mi corazón se acelere? Que pueda recordar apagar la luz una vez que estuve dentro, cosa muy poco habitual en mí, lo que posiblemente sea una señal de que el lodo de semillas de chía que me prepara para el desayuno en las mañanas mientras corro tarde al trabajo en realidad está haciendo que mi cerebro sea más inteligente.

Es bueno que haya decidido mudarme. Lo mejor. Estas irregularidades cardíacas no son sostenibles a largo plazo, ni para mi salud mental, ni cardiovascular. Solo soy una humilde principiante en todo este asunto de la nostalgia, pero puedo afirmar con seguridad que vivir con un chico al que solías odiar y del que de alguna manera terminaste enamorándote *no es* un movimiento inteligente. Confía en mí, tengo un doctorado.

(En un campo totalmente ajeno, pero aun así).

¿Sabes lo que *tiene* de bueno sentirse nostálgica? La energía nerviosa constante. Me hace mirar la pila de platos y pensar que limpiar la cocina podría ser una actividad divertida. Cuando Liam entra en la habitación, tengo la inesperada necesidad de cargar el lavavajillas tanto como sea posible. Lo miro, noto la forma en que casi llena el marco de la puerta y le ordeno a mi corazón que deje de palpitar tan rápido. Lo continúa haciendo de todos modos, incluso agrega un latido extra por si acaso.

Mi corazón es un idiota.

—Probablemente te estés preguntando si un francotirador me está obligando a lavar los platos a punta de pistola. —Le sonrío a Liam sin esperar realmente que me devuelva la sonrisa, porque… es Liam. Es casi imposible de leer, pero hace tiempo que dejé de tratar de *ver* su diversión, y simplemente me permito *sentirla.* Es agradable y cálido, y quiero bañarme en él. Quiero hacerle mover la cabeza, y decir «Mara» en ese tono suyo, y reírse contra su buen juicio. Quiero ponerme de puntillas, extender la mano para arreglar el oscuro mechón de cabello en su frente, enterrarme en su pecho para oler el olor limpio y delicioso de su piel.

Pero dudo *que él* quiera nada de eso. Así que vuelvo a enjuagar un tazón de cereal escondido debajo del colador.

—Pensé que estabas siendo controlada mentalmente por esas esporas parásitas que vimos en ese documental. —Su voz es baja. Rica. Lo extrañaré mucho, *mucho.*

—Esos eran percebes… Mira, sabía que te quedaste dormido a medias. —Él no responde. Lo cual está bien, porque es Liam. Un hombre de pocas sonrisas y muchísimas menos palabras—. Entonces, ¿conoces al cachorro de los vecinos? ¿El bulldog francés? Debió escaparse durante un paseo, porque lo acabo de ver correr hacia mí en medio de la calle. Correa colgando de su cuello y todo. —Alcanzo una

toalla y mi mano choca con la de él. Está parado justo detrás de mí ahora—. ¡Uy! Lo siento. De todos modos, lo llevé a casa y era tan lindo…

Me detengo. Porque, de repente, Liam no está solo *parado* detrás de mí. Me aprieta contra el fregadero, el borde de la encimera presionado contra los huesos de mi cadera y hay una pared alta de calor pegada a mi espalda.

Ay dios mío.

Él… ¿Se tropezó? Debe haber tropezado. Esto es un accidente.

—¿Liam?

—¿Está esto bien, Mara? —pregunta, pero no se aleja. Se queda justo donde está, con su frente presionado contra mi espalda, las manos contra el mostrador a cada lado de mis caderas, y… ¿Es esto una especie de sueño lúcido? ¿Es este un evento cardiovascular generado por todo el tiempo que mi corazón lleva latiendo aceleradamente? ¿Mi cerebro está convirtiendo mis fantasías nocturnas más vergonzosas en alucinaciones?

—¿Liam? —gimoteo, porque él está acariciando mi cabello. Justo encima de mi sien, con su nariz y tal vez incluso con su boca, y parece deliberado. No es un accidente. ¿Está él…? No. No, seguro que no.

Pero sus manos se extienden sobre mi vientre, y eso es lo que me indica que esto es diferente. Esto no se siente como uno de esos roces accidentales de brazos en el pasillo, esos con los que me he estado diciendo que deje de obsesionarme. No se siente como esa vez que tropecé con el cable de mi computadora y casi me tropiezo con su regazo, y no se siente como si él sujetara suavemente mi muñeca para comprobar cuánto me quemé el pulgar mientras cocinaba en la estufa. Esto se siente…

—¿Liam?

—Shh. —Siento sus labios en mi sien, cálidos y tranquilizadores—. Todo está bien, Mara.

Algo caliente y líquido comienza a enrollarse en el fondo de mi vientre.

Capitulo 1

Hace seis meses

—Francamente, *se llevan como una casa en llamas* es el dicho más engañoso en el idioma español. ¿Cableado defectuoso? ¿Mal uso de los equipos de calefacción? ¿Sospecha de incendio premeditado? *No* evoca la imagen de dos personas que se llevan bien en lo más mínimo. ¿Sabes lo que una casa en llamas me tiene imaginando? Bazucas. Lanzallamas. Sirenas en la distancia. Porque nada está más garantizado para iniciar un incendio en una casa que dos enemigos quemando la posesión más preciada del otro. ¿Quieres desencadenar una explosión? Ser amable con tu compañero de cuarto no lo va a lograr. Encender un fósforo encima de su edredón hecho a mano empapado en queroseno, por otro lado…

—¿Señorita? —El conductor de Uber se da vuelta, luciendo culpable por interrumpir mi perorata pre-apocalíptica—. Solo un aviso: estamos a unos cinco minutos de su destino.

Sonrío a modo de agradecimiento y vuelvo a mirar mi teléfono. Las caras de mis dos mejores amigas ocupan toda la pantalla. Luego, en la esquina superior estoy yo: más ceñuda que de costumbre (lo cual está justificado), más pálida que de costumbre (¿es eso posible?) y más pelirroja que de costumbre (debe ser el filtro, ¿no?).

—Esa es una opinión totalmente justa, Mara —dice Sadie con una expresión desconcertada—, y te animo a que envíes tus, um, quejas muy válidas a Madame Merriam-Webster o a quien sea que esté a cargo de estos asuntos, pero… Literalmente solo te pregunté cómo estuvo el funeral.

—Sí, Mara, ¿cómo fue el funeral? —La calidad de la llamada de Hannah es lamentable, pero es lo normal.

Supongo que esto es lo que sucede cuando conoces a tus mejores amigas en la escuela de posgrado: en un minuto estás feliz como una almeja, agarrando tu brillante y nuevo diploma de ingeniería, riéndote tontamente mientras tomas una quinta ronda de Midori sour. Al siguiente estás llorando, porque todos van por caminos separados. FaceTime se vuelve tan necesario como el oxígeno. No hay cócteles de color verde neón a la vista. Tus monólogos ligeramente trastornados no suceden en la privacidad del departamento que comparten, sino en el asiento trasero semipúblico de un Uber, mientras estás en camino a tener una conversación muy, *muy* extraña.

Mira, eso es lo que más odio de la adultez: en algún punto, uno tiene que empezar a actuar como uno. Sadie está diseñando elegantes edificios ecosostenibles en la ciudad de New York. Hannah se está congelando el trasero en una estación de investigación del Ártico que la NASA instaló en Noruega. Y en cuanto a mí…

Estoy aquí. Me mude a DC para comenzar el trabajo de mis sueños: científica en la Agencia de Protección Ambiental. Sobre el papel, debería estar en la luna. Pero el papel se quema *muy* rápido. Tan rápido como las casas en llamas.

—El funeral de Helena fue… interesante. —Me recuesto contra el asiento—. Supongo que esa es la ventaja de saber que estás a punto de morir. Tienes la oportunidad de intimidar a la gente un poco más. Les dices que si no tocan "Karma Chameleon[1]" mientras bajan tu ataúd, tu fantasma perseguirá a su progenie durante generaciones.

—Me alegro de que hayas podido estar con ella en sus últimos días —dice Sadie.

Sonrío con nostalgia.

—Ella fue la peor hasta el final. Hizo trampa en nuestra última partida de ajedrez. Como si no me hubiera ganado de todos modos. —La echo de menos desmesuradamente. Helena Harding, mi asesora de

[1] Canción de Culture Club

doctorado, consejera y mentora durante los últimos ocho años, era mi familia de una manera en que a mis fríos y distantes parientes de sangre nunca les importó ser. Pero también era anciana, sufría mucho y, como le gustaba decir, *estaba ansiosa por pasar a proyectos más grandes.*

—Fue muy amable de su parte dejarte su casa en DC —dice Hannah. Debe haberse mudado a un mejor fiordo[2], porque en realidad puedo entender sus palabras—. Ahora tendrás un lugar donde estar, pase lo que pase.

Es cierto. Todo es verdad, y estoy inmensamente agradecida. El regalo de Helena fue tan generoso como inesperado, ha sido lo más amable que alguien haya hecho por mí. Pero la lectura del testamento fue hace una semana, y hay algo que no he tenido oportunidad de decirles a mis amigas. Algo muy relacionado con ese dicho de las casas en llamas.

—Sobre eso…

—Oh no. —Dos juegos de seños fruncidos me devuelven la mirada—. ¿Qué pasó?

—Es… Complicado.

—Me *encanta* lo complicado —dice Sadie—. ¿También es dramático? Déjame ir a buscar pañuelos.

—No estoy segura todavía. —Tomo un aliento fortificante—. La casa que Helena me dejó, resulta que en realidad no era… de su propiedad.

—¿Qué? —Sadie aborta la misión de los pañuelos para fruncir el ceño aún más.

—Bueno, ella era la dueña. Pero solo un poco. Solamente… de la mitad.

—¿Y a quién le pertenece la *otra* mitad? —Confíe en Hannah para acercarse al quid del problema.

[2] Un fiordo es un valle excavado por la acción erosionadora de un glaciar que posteriormente ha sido invadido e inundado por el mar.

—Originalmente, el hermano de Helena, quién murió y se lo dejó a sus hijos. Luego, el hijo menor compró su parte a los otros y ahora es el único propietario. Bueno, junto a mí. —Me aclaro la garganta—. Su nombre es Liam. Liam Harding. Es un abogado de poco más de treinta años. Y actualmente vive en la casa. Solo.

Los ojos de Sadie se agrandan.

—Vaya mierda. ¿Helena lo sabía?

—No tengo ni idea. Lo supondría, pero los Harding son una familia muy rara. —Me encojo de hombros—. Dinero viejo. Montones de este. Son como los Vanderbilts o los Kennedy. ¿Qué sucede incluso dentro de los cerebros de las personas ricas?

—Probablemente monóculos —dice Hannah.

Asiento con la cabeza.

—O jardines topiarios[3].

—Cocaína.

—Torneos de polo.

—Gemelos para camisas.

—Espera —nos interrumpe Sadie—. ¿Qué dijo Liam Vanderbilt Kennedy Harding sobre esto en el funeral?

—Excelente pregunta, pero: él no estaba allí.

—¿Él no se presentó al *funeral de su tía?*

—Realmente no se mantiene en contacto con su familia. Mucho drama, sospecho. —Toco mi barbilla—. ¿Tal vez son menos como los Vanderbilts, y más como las Kardashians?

—¿Estás diciendo que él no sabe que eres dueña de la otra mitad de su casa?

[3] El arte de la topiaria es una práctica de jardinería que consiste en dar formas artísticas a las plantas mediante el recorte con tijeras de podar.

—Alguien me dio su número y le dije que me pasaría por allí. —Hago una pausa antes de agregar—: Por mensaje de texto. Todavía no hemos hablado. —Otra pausa—. Y realmente no… ha respondido tampoco.

—No me gusta esto —dicen Sadie y Hannah al unísono. En cualquier otro momento me reiría de su mente de colmena, pero hay algo más que todavía no les he dicho. Algo que les gustará aún menos.

—Dato curioso sobre Liam Harding… ¿Recuerdan que Helena era la Oprah de la ciencia medioambiental? —Me muerdo el labio inferior—. ¿Y ella siempre bromeaba diciendo que toda su familia era, en su mayoría, académicos de tendencias liberales que querían salvar al mundo de las garras de las grandes corporaciones?

—¿Sí?

—Su sobrino es abogado corporativo de FGP Corp. —Solo decir las palabras me dan ganas de hacer gárgaras con enjuague bucal. Y usar hilo dental. Mi dentista estará encantado.

—FGP Corp, ¿la gente de los combustibles fósiles? —Una línea profunda aparece en medio de la frente de Sadie—. ¿Grandes ligas en el asunto de las petroleras?

—Sí.

—Oh, *Dios mío.* ¿Él sabe que eres una científica ambiental?

—Bueno, le di mi nombre. Y mi perfil de LinkedIn está a solo una búsqueda de Google. ¿Crees que la gente rica usa LinkedIn?

—Nadie usa LinkedIn, Mara. —Sadie se frota la sien—. Jesucristo, esto es realmente malo.

—No es tan malo.

—No puedes ir a reunirte con él sola.

—Estaré bien.

—Te matará. Tú le matarás a él. Se matarán el uno al otro.

—Yo… ¿quizás? —Cierro los ojos y me apoyo en el asiento. Llevo setenta y dos horas convenciéndome a mí misma de que no debo entrar en pánico, obteniendo resultados mixtos. Ahora no puedo echarme atrás—. Créeme, él es la última persona con la que quiero compartir la copropiedad de una casa. Pero Helena me dejó su mitad, y la necesito. Debo mil millones en préstamos estudiantiles, y DC es increíblemente caro. ¿Quizás pueda quedarme allí por un tiempo? Así puedo ahorrar en alquiler. Es una decisión fiscalmente responsable, ¿no?

Sadie pone cara de circunstancias justo cuando Hannah dice combativamente:

—Mara, eras una estudiante de posgrado hasta hace diez minutos. Estás apenas por encima del umbral de la pobreza. No *dejes* que te eche de esa casa.

—¡Tal vez ni siquiera le importe! De hecho, estoy muy sorprendida de que viva allí. No me malinterpreten, la casa es bonita, pero… —Me detengo, pensando en las fotos que he visto, las horas que pasé en Google Street View desplazándome y volviendo a desplazarme por los marcos, tratando de controlar el hecho de que Helena se preocupaba por mí lo suficiente como para *dejarme una casa*. Es una hermosa propiedad, sin duda. Pero es más bien una residencia familiar. Para nada lo que esperaría de un abogado experto que probablemente gana el PIB anual de un país europeo por hora facturable. ¿No viven los abogados de alto nivel en lujosos áticos del piso cincuenta y nueve con bidés dorados, bodegas de brandy y estatuas de sí mismos? Por lo que sé, apenas pasa tiempo en la casa. Así que voy a ser honesta con él. Explicarle mi situación. Estoy segura de que podemos encontrar algún tipo de solución que…

—Aquí estamos —me dice el conductor con una sonrisa. Se la devuelvo, un poco débil.

—Si no nos envías un mensaje de texto dentro de media hora —dice Hannah en un tono muy serio—, voy a asumir que Big Oil Liam te tiene cautiva en su sótano y llamaré a la policía.

—Oh, no te preocupes por eso. ¿Recuerdas esa clase de kickboxing que tomé en nuestro tercer año? ¿Y esa vez en el festival de la fresa, cuando le pateé el trasero al tipo que intentó robarte el pastel?

—Era un niño de ocho años, Mara. Y no *le* pateaste el trasero, le diste tu propio pastel y un beso en la frente. Envía un mensaje de texto en treinta minutos o llamo a la policía.

La fulmino con la mirada.

—Suponiendo que un oso polar no te haya asaltado mientras tanto.

—Sadie está en New York y tiene a la policía de DC en marcación rápida.

—Sí. —Sadie asiente—. Configurándolo ahora mismo.

Empiezo a sentirme nerviosa en el momento en que salgo del auto, y empeora a medida que arrastro mi maleta por el camino: una pesada bola de ansiedad se acurruca lentamente detrás de mi esternón. Me detengo a mitad de camino para tomar una respiración profunda. Culpo de ello a Hannah y Sadie, se preocupan demasiado y aparentemente son contagiosas. Estaré bien. Todo saldrá bien. Liam Harding y yo tendremos una conversación agradable y tranquila y encontraremos la mejor solución posible, una que sea satisfactoria para…

Observo el jardín de principios de otoño a mi alrededor, y mi tren de pensamientos se desvanece.

Es una casa sencilla. Grande, pero sin nada de esa mierda de jardines topiarios, ni cenadores rococó o esos gnomos espeluznantes. Solo un césped bien cuidado con algún que otro rincón ajardinado, un puñado de árboles que no reconozco y un gran patio de madera amueblado con piezas que parecen cómodas. A la luz del sol de la tarde, los ladrillos

rojos dan a la casa un aspecto acogedor y hogareño. Y cada centímetro cuadrado del lugar parece espolvoreado con el cálido amarillo de las hojas de ginkgo.

Inhalo el olor a hierba, corteza y sol, y cuando mis pulmones están llenos, dejo escapar una risa suave. Podría enamorarme tan fácilmente de este lugar. ¿Es posible que ya lo esté? ¿Mi primer amor a primera vista?

Tal vez por eso Helena me dejó la casa, porque sabía que formaría una conexión inmediata. O tal vez el solo hecho de saber que ella me quería aquí, me tiene lista para abrirle mi corazón. De cualquier manera, no importa: este lugar se siente como si fuera su hogar, y Helena vuelve a ser su yo entrometido, esta vez desde el más allá. Después de todo, ella siempre hablaba y hablaba sobre cómo quería que yo realmente perteneciera.

—*Sabes, Mara, puedo decir que te sientes sola* —me decía cada vez que pasaba por su oficina para conversar.

—*¿Cómo lo sabes?*

—*Porque las personas que no se sienten solas no escriben fanfiction de la franquicia de* The Bachelor *en su tiempo libre.*

—*No es fanfiction. Son más bien metacomentarios sobre los temas epistemológicos que surgen en cada episodio y, ¡mi blog tiene muchos lectores!*

—*Escucha, eres una joven brillante. Y todo el mundo ama a las pelirrojas. ¿Por qué no sales con uno de los nerds de tu séquito? Idealmente uno que no huela a abono orgánico.*

—*¿Porque son todos idiotas que siguen preguntando cuándo dejaré los estudios para ir a obtener un título en economía doméstica?*

—*Mmm. Esa* es *una buena razón.*

Tal vez Helena finalmente se dio cuenta de que cualquier esperanza de que me estableciera con *alguien* era una causa perdida y decidió canalizar sus esfuerzos para que me estableciera en *algún lugar.* Casi

puedo imaginarla, riéndose como una bruja satisfecha, y eso me hace extrañarla un millón de veces más.

Sintiéndome mucho mejor, dejo mi maleta justo al lado del porche (nadie la va a robar, no estando cubierta con pegatinas frikis que ponen: MANTÉN LA CALMA Y SIGUE RECICLANDO, y LOS PLANETAS HABITABLES SON DIFÍCILES DE ENCONTRAR, CRÉEME, SOY INGENIERA MEDIOAMBIENTAL). Paso una mano por mis largos rizos, con la esperanza de que no luzcan demasiado desordenados (probablemente lo estén). Me recuerdo a mí misma que es poco probable que Liam Harding sea una amenaza, solo un hombre rico y mimado con la profundidad de una tabla de surf que no puede intimidarme, y levanto mi brazo para tocar el timbre. Excepto que la puerta se abre antes de que pueda llegar a ella, y me encuentro de pie frente a…

Un pecho.

Un pecho amplio y bien definido debajo de una camisa abotonada. Y una corbata. Y una chaqueta de traje oscuro.

Dicho pecho está pegado a otras partes de un cuerpo, pero es tan amplio que por un momento es todo lo que puedo ver. Luego me las arreglo para desplazar mi mirada y finalmente me fijo en el resto: Piernas largas y musculosas llenando lo que queda del traje. Hombros y brazos que se extienden por millas. Mandíbula cuadrada y labios carnosos. Cabello corto y oscuro, y un par de ojos apenas un tono más oscuros.

Están, me doy cuenta, fijos en mí. Estudiándome con el mismo interés ávido y confuso que estoy experimentando. El hombre parece ser incapaz de apartar la mirada, como si estuviera hechizado en algún nivel básico y profundamente físico. Lo cual es un alivio, porque yo tampoco puedo apartar la mirada, no quiero

Es como un puñetazo en mi plexo solar, lo atractivo que me resulta. Confunde mi cerebro y me hace olvidar que estoy parada frente a un

extraño. Que probablemente debería decir algo. Que el calor que estoy sintiendo probablemente sea inapropiado.

Se aclara la garganta, luciendo tan nervioso como yo me siento.

Sonrío.

—Hola —digo, un poco sin aliento.

—Hola. —Suena exactamente igual. Se humedece los labios, como si su boca estuviera repentinamente seca, y *guau.* El gesto realmente se ve bien en él—. ¿Puedo…? ¿Puedo ayudarte? —Su voz es hermosa. Profunda. Rica. Un poco ronca. Podría casarme con esa voz. Podría revolcarme en esa voz. Podría escuchar esa voz para siempre y renunciar a cualquier otro sonido. Pero tal vez debería responder primero a la pregunta.

—¿Tú, um, vives aquí?

—Creo que sí —dice, como si estuviera demasiado asombrado para recordar. Lo que me hace reír.

—Estupendo. Estoy aquí para… —¿Para qué estoy aquí? Ah, sí—. Estaba buscando, um, a Liam. Liam Harding. ¿Sabes dónde puedo encontrarlo?

—Soy yo. Soy él. —Se aclara la garganta de nuevo. ¿Se está sonrojando? —Es decir, soy Liam.

—Vaya. —Oh, no. Oh *no*… No, no. No—. Soy Mara. Mara Floyd. La… amiga de Helena. Estoy aquí por la casa.

El comportamiento de Liam cambia *instantáneamente.*

Cierra brevemente los ojos, como lo haría uno ante una noticia trágica e insuperable. Por un momento parece traicionado, como si alguien le hubiera dado un precioso regalo solo para robárselo de las manos en el momento en que lo desenvolvió. Cuando dice:

—Eres tú. —Hay un tinte amargo en su hermosa voz.

Se da la vuelta y comienza a caminar por el pasillo. Dudo por un momento, preguntándome qué hacer. No cerró la puerta, así que quiere que lo siga. ¿Verdad? Ni idea. De cualquier manera, soy dueña de la mitad de la casa, ¿así que probablemente no sea culpada de allanamiento? Me encojo de hombros y me apresuro tras él, tratando de seguirle el ritmo a sus piernas mucho más largas, sin captar casi nada de mi entorno hasta que llegamos a una sala de estar.

La cual es impresionante. La casa está llena de ventanales y pisos de madera, oh Dios mío, ¿eso es una *chimenea?* Quiero hacer s'mores[4] en ella. Quiero asar un lechón entero. Con una manzana en la boca.

—Estoy tan contenta de que finalmente podamos hablar cara a cara —le digo a Liam, un poco sin aliento. Finalmente me estoy recuperando de… lo que pasó en la puerta. Jugueteo con el brazalete en mi muñeca, observándolo escribir algo en una hoja de papel—. Siento mucho tu pérdida. Tu tía era mi persona favorita en todo el mundo. No estoy segura de por qué decidió dejarme la casa, y entiendo que este asunto de copropiedad esté un poco fuera de lugar, pero…

Me interrumpo cuando dobla el papel y me lo entrega. Es tan alto que tengo que levantar conscientemente la barbilla para mirarlo a los ojos.

—¿Qué es esto? —No espero su respuesta y lo despliego.

Hay un número escrito en él. Un número con ceros. Muchos de ellos. Miro hacia arriba, confundida.

—¿Qué significa esto?

Él sostiene mi mirada. No hay rastro del hombre nervioso y vacilante que me saludó unos momentos antes. Esta versión de Liam es fríamente guapa y segura de sí misma.

[4] Un s'more es un postre tradicional de Estados Unidos y Canadá, que se consume habitualmente en fogatas nocturnas como las de los exploradores y que consiste en un malvavisco tostado y una capa de chocolate entre dos trozos de galleta.

—Dinero.

—¿Dinero?

Asiente.

—No entiendo.

—Por tu mitad de la casa —dice con impaciencia, y de repente me doy cuenta: está tratando de comprar mi parte

Miro el papel. Es más dinero del que he tenido en mi vida, o del que tendré. ¿Ingeniería Ambiental? Aparentemente, no es una elección de carrera lucrativa. Y no sé mucho sobre bienes raíces, pero supongo que esta suma está *muy* por encima del valor real de la casa.

—Lo siento. Creo que hay un malentendido. No voy a… yo no… —Tomo una respiración profunda—. No creo que quiera vender.

Liam me mira fijamente, sin expresión.

—¿No *crees?*

—N*o* quiero… venderla, eso es.

Él asiente una vez, cortante. Y luego pregunta:

—¿Cuánto más?

—¿Qué?

—¿Cuánto más quieres?

—No, yo… yo no estoy interesada en vender la casa —repito—. Simplemente no puedo. Helena…

—¿Es suficiente el doble?

—*Doble,* ¿Pero qué…? ¿Tienes *cadáveres* enterrados debajo de las flores del jardín?

Sus ojos son bloques de hielo.

—¿Cuánto más?

¿Me está escuchando siquiera? ¿Por qué está siendo tan insistente? ¿Dónde se ha ido su lindo rubor juvenil? En la puerta, parecía tan…

Lo que sea. Estaba claramente equivocada.

—Simplemente no puedo vender. Lo siento. ¿Pero tal vez podamos resolver algo más en los próximos días? No tengo un lugar para quedarme en DC, así que estaba pensando en mudarme aquí por un tiempo…

Exhala una risa silenciosa. Entonces se da cuenta de que hablo en serio y niega con la cabeza.

—No.

—Bien. —Intento ser razonable—. La casa parece grande y…

—No te vas a mudar.

Tomo una respiración profunda.

—Entiendo. Pero mi situación financiera es muy precaria. Voy a empezar mi nuevo trabajo en dos días, y está muy cerca. Incluso puedo ir a pie. Este es un lugar perfecto para vivir por un tiempo, hasta que me recupere.

—Acabo de entregarte la solución a todos tus problemas financieros.

Me estremezco.

—Realmente no es tan simple. —O tal vez lo sea. No lo sé, porque no puedo dejar de recordar las hojas de ginkgo sobre las hortensias y me pregunto cómo se verían en la primavera. Tal vez Helena hubiera querido que yo viera el jardín en todas las estaciones. Si hubiera querido que vendiera, me habría dejado un montón de dinero. ¿Verdad?—. Hay razones por las que preferiría no vender. Pero podemos encontrar una solución. Por ejemplo, ¿podría, um, alquilarte temporalmente mi mitad de la casa y usar el dinero para quedarme en otro lugar?

De esa manera, todavía estaría aferrada al regalo de Helena. Estaría fuera del camino de Liam y por encima del umbral de indigencia. Bueno, *un poco* por encima. Y en el futuro, una vez que Liam se case con su novia (quien probablemente sea una directora ejecutiva de Fortune 500 que puede enumerar el Dow 30 por capitalización bursátil y tenga un artículo favorito en el boletín de *Goop*), se mude a una McMansion en Potomac, MD, y comience una dinastía político-económica, podría volver a visitar este lugar. Mudarme, como Helena parece haber querido. Si para entonces obtengo un aumento de sueldo y puedo pagar la factura del agua por mi cuenta, claro.

Es una propuesta justa, ¿verdad? No. Porque la respuesta de Liam es:

—No. —Vaya, le encanta la palabra.

—¿Pero por qué? claramente tienes el dinero…

—Quiero que esto se resuelva de una vez por todas. ¿Quién es tu abogado?

Estoy a punto de reírme en su cara y contarle una broma sobre mi "equipo legal" cuando suena su iPhone. Comprueba el identificador de llamadas y maldice en voz baja.

—Necesito atender esto. Quédate quieta —ordena, demasiado mandón para mi gusto. Antes de salir de la sala de estar, me mira fijamente con sus ojos fríos y severos y repite una vez más—: Esta no es y *nunca* será tu casa.

Y eso, creo, es todo.

Es esa última frase la que lo remacha. Bueno, junto con la forma condescendiente, dominante y arrogante con la que me habló en los últimos dos minutos. Entré a esta casa completamente lista para tener una conversación productiva. Le di varias opciones, pero se cerró y ahora me estoy *enfureciendo.* Tengo tanto derecho legal como él para estar aquí, y si se niega a reconocerlo…

Bueno. Muy mal por él.

Ira burbujeando en mi garganta, rompo el cheque que Liam me dio en cuatro pedazos y lo dejo caer sobre la mesa de café para que lo encuentre más tarde. Luego vuelvo al porche, recupero mi maleta y empiezo a buscar un dormitorio sin usar.

¿Adivinen qué? Le envío un mensaje de texto a Sadie y Hannah. *La Doctora Mara Floyd acaba de mudarse a su nueva casa. Y definitivamente está en llamas.*

Capitulo 2

Hace cinco meses, dos semanas

No tengo tiempo para esto.

Voy tarde al trabajo. Tengo una reunión en media hora. Todavía tengo que cepillarme los dientes *y* el pelo.

Realmente *no* tengo tiempo para esto.

Y, sin embargo, como la tonta en la que me he convertido, cedo a la tentación. Cierro la puerta del frigorífico, me doy la vuelta para apoyarme en él, cruzo los brazos tan amenazadoramente como puedo y miro a Liam a través de la cocina de concepto abierto.

—Sé que has estado usando mi crema para el café.

Es energía desperdiciada. Porque Liam simplemente está de pie en el costado de la isla, tan impasible como el granito de la encimera, untando tranquilamente mantequilla en una tostada. No se defiende. Ni siquiera me mira. Continúa con su mantequilla, sin molestias, y pregunta:

—¿Eso crees?

—No eres tan sigiloso cómo piensas, amigo. —Le doy mi mejor mirada asesina—. Y si esto es algún tipo de táctica de intimidación, no está funcionando.

Asiente con la cabeza. Sigue sin inmutarse.

—¿Has informado a la policía?

—¿Qué?

Encoge sus estúpidos y anchos hombros. Lleva un traje, porque *siempre* lleva un traje. Un traje de tres piezas gris carbón que le queda

perfecto, y sin embargo no del todo, porque en realidad no tiene el físico de malvado hombre de negocios corporativo. ¿Quizás durante su entrenamiento obligatorio de Matar a la Tierra hizo una pasantía como perforador de plataformas petrolíferas?

—Este presunto robo de crema para café parece angustiarte mucho. ¿Le has dicho a la policía?

Respiraciones profundas. Necesito tomar respiraciones profundas. En DC, el asesinato puede ser castigado con hasta treinta años de prisión. Lo sé, porque lo busqué el día después de mudarme. Por otra parte, si el jurado fuese medianamente razonable nunca me condenaría, no si expusiera los horrores a los que he sido sometida en las últimas semanas. Seguramente considerarían la muerte de Liam como defensa propia. Incluso podrían darme un trofeo.

—Liam, lo estoy intentando aquí. *Realmente* tratando de hacer que esto funcione. ¿Alguna vez te detienes y te preguntas si tal vez *estás* siendo un imbécil?

Esta vez levanta la vista. Sus ojos son tan fríos, todo mi cuerpo tiembla.

—Lo intenté. Una vez. Y justo cuando estaba al borde de un gran avance, alguien comenzó a reproducir la banda sonora de *Frozen* a todo volumen.

Me sonrojo.

—Estaba limpiando mi habitación. No tenía idea de que estabas en casa.

—Mmm. —Él asiente y luego hace algo que no esperaba: se acerca. Da unos cuantos pasos pausados, abriéndose camino a través de la hermosa combinación de electrodomésticos ultramodernos y muebles clásicos de la cocina hasta que se eleva sobre mí. Me mira como si fuera un problema de hormigas del que creía haberse librado hace tiempo. Huele a champú y a telas caras, y aún sostiene el cuchillo de la mantequilla. ¿Puedes apuñalar a alguien con eso? No lo sé, pero parece

que Liam Harding sería capaz de asesinar a alguien (es decir, a mí) con una pelota de playa—. ¿No es tu crema de apoyo emocional mala para el medio ambiente, Mara? —pregunta, en voz baja y profunda—. Piensa en el impacto que tienen los alimentos ultraprocesados. Los ingredientes tóxicos. Todo ese plástico.

Es tan condescendiente que podría morderlo. En lugar de eso, cuadro los hombros y me acerco aún más.

—Hago algo de lo que probablemente nunca hayas oído hablar: se llama *reciclaje*.

—¿En serio? —Deja el cuchillo en el mostrador y mira a mi lado, a los contenedores que instalé después de mudarme. Están desbordados, pero solo porque he estado demasiado ocupada para llevarlos al centro. Y él lo *sabe*.

—No hay recogida de basura en el barrio. Pero planeo conducir hasta el… ¿Qué estás… —Las manos de Liam se cierran alrededor de mi cintura, sus dedos son tan largos que se juntan en mi espalda *y* sobre mi ombligo. Mi cerebro tartamudea hasta detenerse. ¿Qué diablos está haciendo?

Me levanta hasta que estoy flotando sobre el suelo, luego me mueve sin esfuerzo unos centímetros hacia el lado del refrigerador. Como si fuera tan ligera como una caja de Amazon, de esas gigantes que, por alguna razón, solo tienen una barra de desodorante dentro. Farfullo tan indignada como puedo, pero él no me presta atención. En cambio, abre la nevera, toma un tarro de jalea de frambuesa y murmura:

—Entonces será mejor que te pongas manos a la obra —dice con una última mirada larga e intensa.

Vuelve a su tostada y yo vuelvo a no existir en su universo.

Encantador.

Gruño mientras salgo de la habitación, medio nerviosa y con ganas de cometer homicidio, todavía sintiendo las palmas de sus manos

presionando mi piel. *Mientras duerme... Juro que voy a matarlo mientras duerme. Cuando menos lo espere. Y luego lo celebraré arrojando botellas vacías de crema sobre su cadáver.*

Diez minutos más tarde estoy sudando de rabia, camino al trabajo mientras estoy en una videollamada de emergencia con Sadie. Ha habido muchas de esas en las últimas semanas. *Muchas.*

—…ni siquiera bebe café. Lo que significa que tira la crema por el inodoro para fastidiarme o la bebe como si fuera agua y, sinceramente, no sé qué escenario sería peor, porque, por un lado, una porción equivale a seiscientas cuarenta calorías y Liam todavía se las arregla para tener solo un tres por ciento de grasa corporal, pero por otro lado, tomarse un tiempo de su apretada agenda para privarme *de* mi *crema* es un gesto de crueldad sin precedentes que nadie debería hacer… —Me detengo cuando me doy cuenta de su expresión desconcertada—. ¿Qué?

—Nada.

Entrecierro los ojos.

—¿Me estás mirando raro?

—¡No! No. —Ella niega con la cabeza enfáticamente—. Es solo que…

—¿Solo que, qué?

—Has estado hablando de Liam sin parar durante —levanta una ceja— ocho minutos seguidos, Mara.

Mis mejillas arden.

—Lo siento mucho, yo…

—No me malinterpretes, me *encanta* esto. Escucharte despotricar en contra de alguien acaba de convertirse en mi postre favorito, diez de diez, lo recomendaría. Siento que nunca te había visto así, ¿sabes? Vivimos juntas durante cinco años. Por lo general, estas metida hasta

las narices en el compromiso mutuo y la armonía y predicando sobre lo que canta John Lennon en *Imagine*.

Trato de no vivir mi vida en un estado perenne de ira ardiente. Mis padres eran el tipo de personas que probablemente no deberían haber tenido hijos: desinteresados, poco cariñosos, impacientes porque me mudara para poder convertir el dormitorio de mi infancia en un armario de zapatos. Sé cómo convivir con los demás y minimizar los conflictos, porque lo he estado haciéndolo desde que tenía diecisiete años, hace diez años. *Vive y deja vivir* es un conjunto de habilidades cruciales en cualquier espacio de vida compartido, y tuve que dominarlo rápidamente. Y todavía lo domino. Realmente lo hago. Solo que no estoy segura de *querer* dejar vivir a Liam Harding.

—Lo estoy intentando, Sadie, pero no soy yo quien sigue bajando el maldito termostato a cero. ¿Quién no se molesta en apagar las luces antes de salir? Nuestra factura eléctrica es una *locura.* Hace dos días, llegué a casa después del trabajo y la única persona en la casa era un tipo al azar sentado en mi sofá que me ofreció mis propios Cheez-Its. ¡Pensé que era un asesino a sueldo que Liam había contratado para matarme!

—Ay dios mío. ¿Era un asesino a sueldo?

—No. Era Calvin, el amigo de Liam, quien trágicamente es un millón de veces más amable que él. El punto es que Liam es el tipo de compañero de piso de mierda que invita a la gente cuando no está en casa, sin decírtelo. Además, ¿por qué diablos no puede saludarme cuando me ve? ¿Y, es psicológicamente incapaz de cerrar los armarios? ¿Tiene algún trauma de raíz que lo llevó a decorar la casa exclusivamente con estampados de árboles en blanco y negro? ¿Es consciente de que no tiene que dar un portazo cada vez que sale? ¿Y es absolutamente necesario que sus estúpidos colegas/amigos vengan todos los fines de semana a jugar videojuegos en el…? —Termino de cruzar la calle y miro la pantalla. Sadie se está mordiendo el labio inferior, pensativa—. ¿Qué está sucediendo?

—Estabas realmente perdida en tus divagaciones y no parecías necesitarme, así que hice algo.

—¿Qué hiciste?

—Busqué en Google a Liam.

—¿Qué? ¿Por qué?

—Porque me gusta poner cara a las personas de las que hablo durante varias horas a la semana.

—Hagas lo que hagas, *no hagas* clic en su página en el sitio web de FGP Corp. ¡No le des clic!

—Demasiado tarde. Vaya… realmente se ve…

—Como si el calentamiento global y el capitalismo hubiesen tenido un hijo ilegítimo que está pasando por una fase de culturismo.

—Em… Iba a decir lindo.

Resoplo.

—Cuando lo miro, todo lo que puedo ver son todas las tazas de café sin crema que he estado bebiendo desde el día que me mudé. —Y tal vez a veces, solo a veces, rememoro esa mirada aturdida y asombrada que me dio antes de saber quién era yo. Tengo un extraño sentimiento de pérdida al pensar en ello. ¿Pero a quién estoy engañando? Debo haberlo alucinado.

—¿Ha intentado comprarte otra vez? —pregunta Sadi.

—Realmente ni siquiera se digna a reconocer mi existencia. Bueno, excepto para mirarme de vez en cuando como si fuera una cucaracha que ha infestando su prístino espacio vital. Pero su abogado me envía correos electrónicos con ofertas de compra ridículas cada dos días. —Puedo ver mi edificio de trabajo, a cien pies de distancia—. Pero no lo haré. Me quedaré con lo único que me dejó Helena. Y una vez que esté en un lugar mejor financieramente, simplemente me mudaré. No

debería llevar mucho tiempo, unos meses como máximo. Y mientras tanto…

—¿Seguirás a base de café negro?

Suspiro.

—Mientras tanto, estaré bebiendo un café amargo y repugnante.

Capitulo 3

Hace cinco meses, una semana

Estimada Helena,

Esto es raro

¿Esto es raro?

Probablemente sea raro.

Quiero decir, estás muerta. Y yo estoy aquí, escribiéndote una carta. Cuando ni siquiera estoy segura de creer en el más allá. La verdad es que dejé de pensar en temas escatológicos en el bachillerato porque me ponían ansiosa y me hacían brotar urticaria en la axila izquierda (nunca en la derecha, ¿qué pasa con eso?). Y no es como si alguna vez fuera a descifrar un misterio que eludió a grandes pensadores como Foucault o Derrida o ese tipo alemán incomprensible con patillas pobladas y sífilis.

Pero estoy divagando.

Ya hace más de un mes que te fuiste, y todo sigue igual. La humanidad todavía está en las garras de las cábalas capitalistas; todavía tenemos que encontrar una manera de frenar la catástrofe inminente que es el cambio climático antropogénico; siempre que salgo a correr uso mi camiseta de «Salva a las abejas y cobra impuestos a los ricos.» Lo normal. Me encanta el trabajo que estoy haciendo en la EPA (muchas gracias por esa carta de recomendación, por cierto; estoy muy agradecida de que no hayas mencionado esa vez que nos sacaste a Sadie, a Hannah y a mí de la cárcel después de esa protesta contra las represas. Al gobierno de EE.UU. no *le hubiera gustado eso). Existe el pequeño problema de que* soy *la única mujer en un equipo de seis, y que los tipos con los que trabajo parecen creer que mi blando cerebro femenino es incapaz de comprender conceptos sofisticados como… ¿la esfericidad de la Tierra, supongo? El otro día, Sean, el líder de mi equipo, dedicó treinta minutos a*

explicarme el contenido de mi propia disertación. Tengo fantasías muy vívidas sobre golpearlo en la cabeza y colocar su cadáver debajo de mi bañera, pero probablemente ya sepas todo esto. Probablemente te sientas en una nube todo el día siendo omnisciente. Comiendo Galletas. De vez en cuando tocando el arpa. Vaga perezosa.

Creo que la razón por la que escribo esta carta que nunca jamás leerás es porque desearía poder hablar contigo. Si mi vida fuera una película, caminaría penosamente hasta tu lápida y desnudaría mi corazón mientras una sinfonía de dominio público en re menor suena de fondo. Pero te enterraron en California (¿un poco inconveniente?, pues sí, la verdad), lo que hace que escribir esta carta sea la única opción factible.

Todo esto es para decir: Primero: Te extraño. Un montón. Un puto montón. ¿Cómo pudiste dejarme aquí sin ti? Qué vergüenza, Helena. ¡Una vergüenza!

Segundo: Estoy tan, tan agradecida de que me hayas dejado esta casa. Es el mejor y más acogedor lugar en el que he vivido, sin duda alguna. He estado pasando mis fines de semana leyendo en la terraza acristalada. Honestamente, nunca pensé que pondría un pie en una casa con un vestíbulo sin ser escoltada fuera de las instalaciones por seguridad. Yo solo… Nunca antes había tenido un lugar que fuera mío. Un lugar que va a estar allí pase lo que pase. Un puerto seguro, por así decirlo. Siento tu presencia cuando estoy en casa, incluso si la última vez que pusiste un pie aquí fue probablemente en los años 70 cuando volvías de alguna marcha por la liberación de la mujer. Y no te preocupes, recuerdo con cariño tu odio por todas las cosas cursis y casi puedo oírte decir: «Corta esta mierda.» *Así que lo haré.*

Tercero, y esto es menos una declaración y más una pregunta: ¿Te importaría si matara a tu sobrino? Porque estoy muy cerca de hacerlo. Condenadamente cerca. Básicamente lo estoy apuñalando con un pelador de papas mientras hablamos. Aunque ahora se me ocurre que tal vez eso sea exactamente lo que querías. Nunca mencionaste a Liam en todos los años que te conocí, después de todo. Y él trabaja para una empresa cuyo principal producto son los gases de efecto invernadero, así que tal vez lo odiabas. Tal vez toda nuestra amistad fue una larga estafa que sabías que terminaría conmigo

vertiendo líquido de frenos en el té de tu pariente menos favorito. En cuyo caso, bien hecho. Y te odio.

Podría darte una lista completa de sus horrores (ya he creado una en mi aplicación de Notas), pero me gusta castigar a Sadie y Hannah a través de Zoom. Yo solo… Supongo que desearía entender por qué me pusiste en el camino de uno de los idiotas más idiotas del país. Del mundo. De toda la maldita Vía Láctea. Con solo la forma en que me mira, la forma en que **no me** *mira. Claramente puedo decir que piensa que está por encima de mí, y…*

El timbre suena. Me detengo a mitad de la frase y corro hacia la entrada. Lo que me toma como dos minutos enteros, probando mi punto de que esta casa es lo suficientemente grande para dar cobijo a dos personas.

Ojalá pudiera decir que Liam Harding tiene un gusto de mierda en lo que a decoración se refiere. Que abusa de las calcomanías con citas inspiradoras, que compra frutas de plástico en Ikea, o que pega esas luces de neón típicas de los bares por todas partes. Lamentablemente, o bien sabe cómo montar el interior de una casa y que el resultado sea bastante agradable, o su dinero de sangre de FPG Corp pagó para contratar a alguien que lo hace. El lugar es una elegante combinación de piezas tradicionales y modernas; estoy casi segura de que quienquiera que lo haya amueblado puede usar correctamente las palabras «*paleta de colores*» en una oración, y que la forma en que los rojos profundos, los verdes bosque y los grises suaves complementan los pisos de madera es algo más que accidental. También está el hecho de que en todas partes se ve tan… sencillo. Con una casa tan grande como esta, estaría tentada a llenar cada habitación con mesas, aparadores y alfombras, pero Liam de alguna manera se limita a las necesidades básicas. Sofás, algunas sillas cómodas, estantes llenos de libros. Eso es todo. La casa es espaciosa, llena de luz, escasamente decorada en tonos cálidos, y aún más hermosa por ello.

—Minimalista —me dijo Sadie cuando le di un recorrido en video—. Muy bien hecho, también. —Creo que mi respuesta fue un gruñido.

Y luego está el arte en las paredes, el cual, muy a mi pesar, me está comenzando a gustar. Imágenes de lagos al amanecer y cascadas al atardecer, bosques espesos y árboles solitarios, terrenos congelados y campos en flor. Algún que otro animal salvaje haciendo su vida, siempre en blanco y negro. No sé por qué, pero últimamente me sorprendo a mí misma mirándolos con atención. El encuadre es simple, el tema mundano, pero hay algo en ellas. Como si el que tomó esas fotos realmente se conectara con los escenarios. Como si hubiera intentado capturarlos verdaderamente, para llevarse a casa un pedazo de ellos.

Me pregunto quién es el fotógrafo, pero no puedo encontrar ninguna firma. Probablemente sea algún graduado muerto de hambre de MFA de Georgetown, de todos modos. Alguien que vertió su alma en la serie con la esperanza de que una persona que aprecie el arte la comprase y, en cambio, aquí está. Propiedad de un completo idiota. Apuesto a que Liam ni siquiera los eligió. Apuesto a que solo fueron una compra deducible de impuestos para él. Tal vez pensó que, a la larga, una buena colección es tan buena como los dividendos en acciones.

—Voy a necesitar una firma —me dice el chico de UPS cuando abro la puerta. Masca chicle y aparenta unos quince años. Me siento decrépita por dentro—. No eres William K. Harding, ¿verdad?

William K. Es casi lindo. Lo odio.

—No.

—¿Está en casa?

—No. —Afortunadamente.

—¿Es tu marido?

Me río. Entonces me río un poco más. Me doy cuenta de que el chico de UPS me mira con los ojos entrecerrados como si fuera la Bruja Malvada del Oeste.

—Humm no. Lo siento. Él es mi… Compañero de piso.

—Bien. ¿Puedes firmar por tu compañero de piso?

—Por supuesto. —Alcanzo el bolígrafo, pero mi mano se detiene en el aire cuando noto la insignia de FGP Corp en el sobre.

Los odio. Incluso más de lo que odio a Liam. No solo me hace sentir miserable en casa cortando el césped a las siete y media de la mañana en el único día de la semana en que puedo dormir, sino que además añade un insulto a la injuria al trabajar para una de mis némesis profesionales. FGP Corp es uno de esos enormes conglomerados que siguen provocando desastres medioambientales: un grupo de tipos sobreeducados con trajes de 7,000 dólares que diseminan biotoxinas por todo el mundo con total desprecio por los pelícanos marrones (y por todo el futuro de la humanidad, pero personalmente estoy más unida a los pelícanos, que no han hecho nada para merecer esto).

Observo el grueso sobre de burbujas. ¿Liam recibiría un sobre de la EPA en mi nombre? Lo dudo. O tal vez lo haría. Luego lo ataría a los globos rojos que le proporcionó su amigo Pennywise y lo vería desaparecer en la puesta de sol. Ya estoy un 73 por ciento segura de que ha estado escondiendo mis calcetines. Me quedan cuatro pares iguales, por el amor de Dios.

—En realidad. —Doy un paso atrás, sonriendo, deleitándome con mi propia mezquindad. *Helena, estarías muy orgullosa—*. Probablemente no debería firmar por él. Apuesto a que es un delito federal o algo así.

El chico de UPS niega con la cabeza.

—Realmente no lo es.

Me encojo de hombros.

—¿Quién puede afirmarlo?

—Yo. Es literalmente mi trabajo.

—El cual estás realizando admirablemente —expreso—. Pero aun así no voy a firmar. ¿Te gustaría una taza de té? ¿Una copa de vino? Unos Cheez-Its?

Él frunce el ceño.

—¿Estás segura de que no lo harás? Este es envío exprés. Alguien pagó mucho dinero para que la entrega se realizara el mismo día. Probablemente sea alguna mierda realmente urgente que William K. necesitará tan pronto como llegue a casa.

—Cierto. Bueno, eso suena como un problema de William K.

Él silba.

—Eso es *frío*. —Suena admirado. O simplemente asustado—. Entonces, ¿qué hace el pobre William K.? ¿Deja el asiento del inodoro levantado?

—Tenemos baños separados. —Lo reflexiono. Pero estoy segura de que sí. En la remota posibilidad de que termine usando el suyo.

Él asiente.

—Sabes, cuando mi hermana estaba en la universidad solía tener un compañero de piso al que odiaba. Estoy hablando de tenían montada una guerra entre ellos. Se gritaban el uno al otro todo el tiempo. Una vez escribió una lista completa de todo lo que odiaba de él en su teléfono y se colapsó su aplicación de Recordatorios. Era *así* de larga.

Guau. Eso suena familiar.

—¿Qué pasó con ella?

Cruzo los dedos para que la respuesta no sea. *Está cumpliendo cadena perpetua en un centro penitenciario cercano por afeitarle el cabello mientras dormía y tatuarle «Soy una mala persona» en el cuero cabelludo.* Y, sin embargo, lo que acaba diciendo el chico de UPS es diez veces más inquietante.

—Se casarán el próximo junio. —Sacude la cabeza y se da la vuelta con un movimiento de la mano—. Imagínate.

* * *

Estoy soñando con un concierto, uno malo.

Más ruido que música, en realidad. El tipo de basura electrónica alemana de los años 70 que Liam posee en forma de vinilo y que a veces reproduce cuando uno de sus amigos viene a jugar videojuegos de disparos en primera persona. Es ruidoso, desagradable e irritante, y continúa durante lo que parecen horas. Hasta que me despierto y me doy cuenta de tres cosas:

Primero, tengo un dolor de cabeza horrible.

Segundo, es la mitad de la noche.

Tercero, la música/ruido es en realidad solo ruido normal y proviene de abajo.

Ladrones, creo. *Entraron a la fuerza. Ni siquiera están tratando de ser silenciosos, probablemente tengan armas.*

Tengo que salir, llamar al 911. Tengo que advertir a Liam y asegurarme de que él…

Me siento con el ceño fruncido.

—Liam. —Pero *por supuesto*

Me levanto de la cama y salgo de mi habitación a toda prisa. Estoy a medio camino de las escaleras cuando me doy cuenta de que mis rizos están desordenados, que no llevo sujetador y que mis pantalones cortos ya eran demasiado pequeños hace quince años, cuando mi instituto me los dio gratis como parte de mi uniforme de lacrosse. Bueno. Qué pena. Liam tendrá que lidiar con eso y con mi camiseta de «No hay planeta B.» Podría enseñarle algo.

Para cuando llego a la cocina, estoy considerando comprar un megáfono para acercarme sigilosamente a él mientras duerme todas las noches durante los próximos seis meses.

—Liam, ¿*sabes* qué hora es? —Hago erupción—. ¿Qué demonios estás…?

No estoy segura de lo que esperaba. Definitivamente no esperaba encontrar el contenido del refrigerador abarrotando cada centímetro del mostrador; definitivamente no esperaba ver a Liam empeñado en sacrificar un tallo de apio como si le hubiera robado su lugar de estacionamiento; definitivamente no esperaba verlo desnudo, muy desnudo, de cintura para arriba. El pantalón de pijama a cuadros que lleva puesto tiene la cintura baja.

Muy baja

—¿Podrías ponerte algo, por favor? ¿Cómo un abrigo de piel de cría de foca o algo así?

No deja de picar su apio. No me mira.

—No.

—¿No?

—No tengo frio. Y vivo aquí.

Yo también vivo aquí. Y tengo todo el derecho a no mirar esa pared de ladrillos a la que él llama pecho en mi propia cocina, que se supone que es un entorno relajante en el que puedo digerir la comida sin tener que mirar pezones masculinos al azar. Aun así, decido dejar pasar el asunto y apartarlo de mi mente. Para cuando esté lista para mudarme, necesitaré terapia, de todos modos. ¿Qué es un trauma más con el que lidiar? Ahora mismo, solo quiero volver a dormir.

—¿Qué estás haciendo? —pregunto.

—Mi declaración de impuestos.

Parpadeo.

—¿Qué?

—¿Qué te parece que estoy haciendo?

Me pongo rígida.

—No estoy segura de lo que *parece,* pero *suena* como si estuvieras golpeando las sartenes una contra otra.

—El ruido es un desafortunado subproducto de que esté haciendo la cena. —Debe haber terminado con el apio, porque pasa a cortar un tomate en rodajas, ¿es ese *mi* tomate?, y vuelve a ignorarme.

—Oh, y eso es totalmente normal, ¿no? ¿Cocinar una comida de cinco platos a la una y veintisiete de la mañana un día entre semana?

Liam finalmente levanta sus ojos hacia los míos, y hay algo inquietante en su mirada. Parece tranquilo, pero sé que no lo está. *Está furioso,* me digo. *Está muy, muy furioso. Sal de aquí.*

—¿Necesitabas algo? —Su tono es engañosamente cortés, y mi autoconservación claramente se quedó dormida en la cama.

—Sí. Necesito que dejes de hacer ruido. Y más te vale que ese no sea mi tomate.

Se mete una rodaja en la boca.

—Sabes —dice tranquilamente mientras mastica, arreglándoselas para hablar con la boca llena y aun así parecer el producto aristocrático de varias generaciones de riqueza—, por lo general no tengo la costumbre de estar despierto a la una y veintiocho de la mañana.

—Qué casualidad. Yo tampoco la tenía, antes de *conocerte.*

—Pero hoy, es decir, ayer, todo el equipo legal que dirijo acabó teniendo que trabajar hasta pasada la medianoche. Debido a algunos documentos faltantes muy importantes.

Me tenso. No puede estarse refiriendo a…

—No te preocupes, los documentos fueron encontrados. Eventualmente. *Después* de que mi jefe nos pateara el culo a mí y a mi equipo. Parece que algo salió mal cuando se entregaron. —Si pudiera incinerar a la gente con láseres en los ojos, estaría achicharrada hacía mucho tiempo. Está claro que lo sabe todo sobre mi pequeño ataque de despecho vespertino.

—Escucha. —Tomo una respiración profunda—. No fue mi momento de mayor orgullo, pero no soy tu asistente personal. Y no veo cómo se justifica que golpees todas las sartenes de la casa en medio de la noche. Mañana tengo un largo día, así que…

—Yo también. Y como puedes imaginar, he tenido un largo día hoy. Y tengo hambre. Lo que significa que no voy a dejar de hacer ruido. Al menos no hasta que haya cenado.

Hasta hace unos diez segundos estaba enojada de una manera fría y razonable. De repente, estoy lista para quitarle el cuchillo de la mano a Liam y cortarle la yugular. Solo un poquito. Solo hasta hacerlo sangrar. No lo haré, porque no creo que prospere en la cárcel, pero tampoco voy a dejar pasar esto. Traté de tener respuestas mesuradas cuando se negó a dejarme instalar paneles solares, cuando tiró mi salteado de brócoli porque olía a «pantano» cuando me dejó fuera de la casa mientras corría. Pero esta es la última gota. Se acabó. Es la gota que derramó el vaso.

—¿Estás *bromeando?*

Liam vierte aceite de oliva en una sartén, rompe un huevo y parece volver a su estado predeterminado: olvidarse de que existo.

—Liam, te guste o no, yo vivo. Aquí. ¡No puedes hacer lo que te dé la gana!

—Interesante. Parece que estás haciendo exactamente eso.

—¿De qué estás hablando? *Estás* haciendo una tortilla a *las malditas dos de la mañana* y te estoy *pidiendo* que no lo hagas.

—Cierto. Aunque *está* el hecho de que si hubieras lavado los platos esta semana, no tendría que lavarlos tan ruidosamente…

—Oh, cierra el pico. No es que no dejes tus cosas regadas por toda la casa constantemente.

—Al menos no amontono basura encima del bote de basura como si fuera una escultura dadaísta.

El sonido que sale de mi boca casi me asusta. *Dios.*

—Dios. ¡Es *imposible* tenerte cerca!

—Eso es una lástima, ya que estoy aquí.

—¡Entonces solo *múdate de una puta vez!*

Cae el silencio. Un silencio absoluto, pesado, muy incómodo. Justo lo que ambos necesitamos para repetir mis palabras una y otra vez en nuestras cabezas. Entonces Liam habla. Despacio. Cuidadosamente. Enojado de una manera aterradora y helada.

—¿Disculpa?

Me arrepiento inmediatamente. De lo que dije y de cómo lo dije. Alto. Vehemente. Soy muchas cosas, pero cruel no es una de ellas. No importa que Liam Harding haya mostrado el rango emocional de una nuez, dije algo hiriente y le debo una disculpa. No es que particularmente *quiera* ofrecerle una, pero debería hacerlo. El problema es que no puedo evitar continuar.

—¿Por qué estás aquí, Liam? La gente como tú vive en mansiones con muebles beige incómodos y siete baños y obras de arte caras que no entienden.

—¿La gente como *yo?*

—Sí. La gente como *tu* ¡Gente sin moral y con demasiado dinero!

—¿Por qué *estás* tú aquí? Me he ofrecido a comprar tu mitad unas mil veces.

—Y dije que no, así que podrías haberte ahorrado unos novecientos noventa y nueve de ellos. Liam, no hay razón para que quieras vivir en esta casa.

—¡Esta es la casa de *mi* familia!

—Era la casa de Helena tanto como la tuya, y…

—Helena está jodidamente *muerta*.

Toma unos momentos para que las palabras de Liam se registren por completo. Abruptamente apaga la estufa y luego se queda allí, semidesnudo frente al fregadero, con las manos apretadas alrededor del borde del mostrador y los músculos tan tensos como cuerdas de guitarra. No puedo dejar de mirarlo, esta… esta *víbora* que acaba de mencionar la muerte de una de las personas más importantes de mi vida con tanta rabia y desprecio.

Voy a *destruirlo.* Voy a *aniquilarlo.* Voy a hacerlo sufrir, a escupir en sus estúpidos batidos, a romper uno a uno sus vinilos.

Excepto que Liam hace algo que lo cambia todo. Aprieta los labios, se aprieta la nariz y luego se pasa una mano grande y exhausta por la cara. De repente, algo hace clic dentro de mi cabeza: Liam Harding, parado justo frente a mí, está cansado. Y odia esto, *todo esto,* tanto como yo.

Oh Dios. Tal vez mi salteado de brócoli realmente apestaba, y debería haberlo puesto en un Tupperware. Tal vez la banda sonora de *Frozen* puede ser un poco molesta. Tal vez podría haber recibido ese estúpido paquete. Tal vez tampoco reaccionaría bien si alguien viniera a vivir bajo mi techo, especialmente si no tuviera voz en el asunto.

Presiono las palmas de mis manos en mis ojos. Tal vez yo sea la idiota. O al menos, una de ellos. Dios. Oh *Dios*

—Yo… —Me devano los sesos buscando algo que decir y no encuentro nada. Entonces se rompe un dique dentro de mí y las palabras estallan—. Helena era mi familia. Sé que no te llevas bien con

tu familia, y… tal vez la odiabas, no lo sé. De acuerdo, ella podría ser realmente gruñona y entrometida, pero ella… ella me amaba Y ella era el único hogar real que he tenido. —Me atrevo a mirar a Liam, medio esperando una mueca de burla. Un comentario sarcástico sobre Helena que me hará querer golpearlo de nuevo. Pero él me está mirando, atento, y me obligo a apartar la mirada y continuar antes de que pueda cambiar de opinión—. Creo que ella lo sabía. Creo que tal vez por eso me dejó esta casa, para que tuviera algún tipo de… de algo. Incluso después de que ella se fuera.

Mi voz se rompe en la última palabra, y ahora estoy llorando. No lloro a pleno pulmón como cuando veo *El Rey León* o los primeros diez minutos de *Up*, sino lágrimas silenciosas, escasas e implacables que no tengo esperanzas de detener.

»—Sé que probablemente me veas como… una usurpadora proletario que ha venido a apoderarse de la fortuna de tu familia, y créeme, lo entiendo. —Me limpio la mejilla con el dorso de la mano. Mi voz está perdiendo su tono iracundo cada segundo que pasa—. Pero tienes que entender que mientras vives aquí porque estás tratando de probar algún punto, o para algún tipo de concurso de meadas, esta pila de ladrillos significa el mundo para mí, y…

—Yo no odiaba a Helena.

Miro hacia arriba con sorpresa.

—¿Qué?

—Yo no odiaba a Helena. —Sus ojos están en su tortilla a medio hacer, todavía chisporroteando en la estufa.

—Oh.

—Cada verano se marchaba de California por unas semanas. ¿A dónde crees que iba?

—Yo… solo dijo que pasaba los veranos con su familia. Siempre supuse que…

—Aquí, Mara. Ella venía aquí. Dormía en la habitación contigua a la tuya. —La voz de Liam es entrecortada, pero su expresión se suaviza en algo que nunca antes había visto. Una leve sonrisa—. Ella afirmaba que era para mantener un ojo sobre mis planes de contaminación mundial. Sobre todo, me regañaba por mis elecciones de vida entre cada una de sus reuniones con viejos amigos y la siguiente. Y me pateó mucho el trasero en el ajedrez. —Él frunce el ceño—. Estoy seguro de que hacía trampa, pero nunca pude probarlo.

—Yo… —Debe estarse inventando todo esto. Seguramente—. Ella nunca te mencionó.

Su ceja se levanta.

—Ella nunca te mencionó a ti tampoco. Y, sin embargo, estabas en su testamento.

—Pero… Pero espera. Espera un momento. En el funeral… ¿Pensé que no te llevabas bien con tu familia?

—Oh, no lo hago. Son imbéciles pretenciosos, críticos y performativos, y estoy citando aquí a Helena. Pero ella era diferente, y me llevaba bien con ella. Me preocupaba por ella. Muchísimo. —Se aclara la garganta—. No estoy seguro de dónde sacaste la idea de que no lo hacía.

—Bueno, que no vinieras al funeral me engañó.

—Conociendo a Helena, ¿crees que le hubiera importado?

Pienso en mi segundo año. La única vez que organicé una pequeña fiesta sorpresa para el cumpleaños de Helena en el departamento, y ella simplemente… se fue. Literalmente. Gritamos *¡Sorpresa!* y tiramos un puñado de globos. Helena nos echó una mirada mordaz, entró en la sala, cortó un trozo de su tarta de cumpleaños mientras la mirábamos en silencio, y se fue a su despacho a comérsela sola. Y luego se encerró en él.

—Está bien. Ese es un buen punto.

Liam asiente.

—¿Sabes por qué me dejó la casa?

—No lo sé. Al principio pensé que era algún tipo de broma. Uno de sus caóticos juegos de poder. ¿Como cuando te hacía sentir culpable y te hacía ver viejos programas con ella?

—Dios, ella *siempre* escogía…

—*The Twilight Zone*. A pesar de que ella ya sabía todos los finales inesperados. —Él rueda los ojos. Entonces su expresión cambia—. No sabía que su salud había empeorado tanto. La llamé dos días antes de que muriera, exactamente dos días, y me dijo que… No debería haberle creído.

Mi corazón se hunde. Yo estuve ahí. Sé exactamente a qué conversación se refiere Liam, porque escuché la versión de Helena. La forma en que respondía las preguntas y minimizaba las preocupaciones de la persona al otro lado de la línea. Mintió a lo largo de una hora de charla: era obvio que estaba contenta con la llamada, pero no fue honesta sobre lo mal que se habían puesto las cosas, y me sentí incómoda por el engaño. Por otra parte, ella hizo eso con todos. Habría hecho lo mismo conmigo si no fuera yo la que la llevaba a sus citas médicas.

—Desearía que me hubiese permitido estar allí para ella. —El tono de Liam es impersonal, pero puedo escuchar lo que no se dice. Lo doloroso que debe haber sido que lo mantuviera en la oscuridad—. Pero no lo hizo, y fue su decisión. Al igual que dejarte la casa fue su decisión, y… No estoy feliz por ello. No lo entiendo. Pero lo acepto. O al menos, lo intento.

Por primera vez, me doy cuenta de cómo debe haber sido mi llegada a DC desde la perspectiva de Liam: una chica de la que nunca había oído hablar, una chica que había tenido el privilegio de estar con Helena durante sus últimos días, apareciendo de repente y metiéndose

a la fuerza en su casa. Su vida. Mientras intentaba aceptar su pérdida y llorar al único pariente al que se sentía cercano.

Tal vez actuó como un imbécil. Tal vez nunca me hizo sentir bienvenida o no fue particularmente agradable, pero estaba sufriendo, al igual que yo, y…

Qué desastre total. Qué idiota obtusa he sido.

—Yo… siento lo que dije antes. No quise decir nada de eso. No te conozco en absoluto, y… —Me quedo en blanco, sin saber cómo continuar.

Liam asiente rígidamente.

—Yo también lo siento.

Nos quedamos allí, en silencio, durante largos latidos. Si vuelvo a mi habitación ahora, Liam pedirá una pizza y podré conciliar el sueño sin tener que buscar mi alijo de tapones para los oídos. Casi me voy para hacer precisamente eso, pero se me ocurre algo: las cosas podrían ser mejores. Yo *podría* ser mejor.

—Tal vez podríamos tener una… una especie de ¿tregua?

Levanta una ceja.

—Una tregua.

—Sí, quiero decir... Yo podría… Supongo que podría dejar de subir el termostato a veinticinco grados tan pronto como te das la vuelta. Usar un suéter, en su lugar.

—¿Veinticinco grados?

—Soy una científica. En realidad no usamos la escala de Fahrenheit, ya que es ridícula y... —Me está mirando con una expresión que no puedo descifrar del todo, así que rápidamente cambio de tema—. ¿Y supongo que podría dejar de lado las bandas sonoras de Disney?

—¿Podrías?

—Sí.

—¿Incluso la de *La Sirenita?*

—Sí.

—¿Qué pasa con *Moana?*

—Liam, realmente lo estoy intentando, aquí. Si pudieras, por favor… —Estoy lista para salir corriendo de la cocina cuando me doy cuenta de que en realidad está sonriendo. Bueno, más o menos. Está sonriendo con sus ojos. Dios mío, ¿era una broma? ¿Él *sabe* cómo bromear?— No eres tan divertido cómo crees.

Él asiente y no dice nada por un momento o dos. Luego:

—Las bandas sonoras de Disney no son tan malas. —Suena dolido— . Y trataré de ser mejor, también. Regaré tus plantas cuando estés fuera de la ciudad y estén a punto de morir. —Sabía que dejaría morir mi pepino a propósito. *Lo sabía*—. Y tal vez haga un sándwich para la cena, si tengo hambre pasada la medianoche.

Levanto mi ceja.

Liam suspira.

—¿Pasadas las diez de la noche?

—Eso sería perfecto.

Cruza sus enormes brazos sobre su igualmente enorme pecho aún desnudo, y luego se balancea un poco sobre sus talones.

—Bien entonces.

—De acuerdo.

El silencio se alarga. De repente, esta situación se siente… tensa. Pegajosa. Un borde de algún tipo. Un punto de inflexión.

Creo que es un buen momento para que me vaya.

—Voy a… —Señalo hacia las escaleras, donde está mi dormitorio—. Que tengas una buena noche, Liam.

No me doy la vuelta cuando dice:

—Buenas noches, Mara.

Capitulo 4

Hace cuatro meses, tres semanas

Hay muchas cosas que no esperaría que Liam Harding hiciera cuando entra en la cocina.

Por ejemplo, es poco probable que saque unas castañuelas y se ponga a bailar flamenco en la isla. Que se ponga a cantar un éxito de Michael Bolton de los años 80. Que me venda un soplador de hojas y me reclute en alguna empresa de MLM de herramientas de jardinería. Todos estos son eventos muy improbables, y sin embargo ninguno de ellos me sorprendería tanto como lo que realmente hace. Que es mirarme y decir:

—El clima es… agradable afuera hoy.

No es que no lo sea. Es, de hecho, es muy agradable. Inusualmente cálido. Es porque la Tierra se está muriendo, por supuesto. El aumento de las temperaturas promedio globales está asociado con fluctuaciones generalizadas en los patrones climáticos, y es por eso que todavía usamos chaquetas livianas, aunque estamos a fines de noviembre en DC y los árboles de Navidad han estado apareciendo desde hace semanas. Hace unos años, Helena escribió un artículo sobre la forma en que la acción humana está aumentando la periodicidad y la intensidad de los fenómenos meteorológicos extremos. Se publicó en *Nature Climate Change* y tiene un millón de citas.

Podría decirle todo esto a Liam. Podría ser mi yo más desagradable y darle una disertación sobre el tema durante horas. Pero no lo hago, y la razón es que incluso a través de su tono cortante y vacilante y su mirada actualmente baja, puedo reconocer una rama de olivo cuando me la arrojan.

Lo cual, en este momento, es lo que está sucediendo.

Han pasado unas dos semanas desde que me di cuenta, por primera vez, que Liam es capaz de sentir emociones humanas. Y resulta que estar en una tregua mientras vivimos juntos equivale a tener significativamente menos peleas a gritos, pero aun así no hace que encontrar temas de conversación sea más fácil. Lo cual está bien. La mayor parte del tiempo. Es una casa grande, después de todo. Pero en las contadas ocasiones en que nuestros horarios se superponen y acabamos juntos en el salón o en la cocina…

Resulta extraño.

Como la mierda.

—Sí. —Asiento tan entusiastamente que es probable que termine con una torcedura en el cuello—. Es agradable. Tener este buen tiempo, quiero decir.

Liam también asiente (rígidamente, pero tal vez solo estoy proyectando), y así, volvemos al punto de partida: silencio.

Me muerdo la uña del pulgar. Aparentemente no dejé *de* hacer eso cuando cumplí catorce años. Necesito algo que decir. ¿Qué digo? *Rápido, Mara. Piensa.*

—Em… Así que…

Ni un pensamiento asoma. Mi cabeza se encuentra vacía.

Dejo que mi frase cuelgue como un fideo demasiado cocido y me doy la vuelta para tomar… ¿Qué? ¿Una espátula? ¿Una tostadora? ¡Un bocadillo! Sí, tomaré un bocadillo. Creo que compré porciones individuales de Cheez-Its. Tratando de recortar y todo eso. Excepto que no puedo encontrarlos en el armario. Hay una caja familiar. Otra. Una tercera, con sabor a queso cheddar, Jesús, tengo un problema. Pero las bolsitas con las porciones individuales no están… Oh, ahí están. En el estante más alto, por supuesto. Recuerdo tirarlos allí, pensando que no sería un problema para la Mara del Futuro.

La Mara del Futuro lo intenta, pero no puede alcanzarlo. Entonces mira hacia atrás para pedirle a Liam que alcance una para ella, y su corazón se hunde.

Está mirando donde mi camiseta se subió en la parte baja de mi espalda, es decir, mi trasero.

Bueno no. Él es William K. Harding nunca se rebajaría tanto, y la idea de que miraría voluntariamente mi trasero flacucho es ridícula. Pero él me está mirando, *ahí*, con los labios entreabiertos y la mano suspendida en el aire, lo que probablemente significa que está… ¿horrorizado? Por mis pantalones deportivos de ocho años, puedo apostar. O por la explosión de pecas en mi piel. O por… Dios, ¿qué bragas tengo puestas? Por favor, que no sean los que tienen la cara de Jeff Goldblum que Hannah me compró el año pasado ¿y cuántos agujeros tienen? Me va a denunciar a la policía de la ropa interior. Seré ejecutada por la mafia de Victoria's Secret y…

Se aclara la garganta.

—Permíteme. —Valientemente supera su disgusto y viene a pararse detrás de mí. Él es simplemente *enorme.* Tan grande que bloquea por completo la luz del techo. Por un microsegundo siento calor, y un extraño hormigueo. Luego deja caer una bolsa al lado de mi mano sin que yo tenga que preguntar y dice—: ¿Debería moverlos a un estante más bajo para ti?

Su voz es un poco grave. Tal vez se esté resfriando. Espero no contagiarme.

—Um, eso sería genial. Gracias. —Le toma alrededor de medio segundo. Entonces los dos regresamos a nuestra posición original, yo con mi café, Liam con su té, y me doy cuenta de que en las aventuras levemente mortificantes del último minuto, olvidé pensar en un tema de conversación decente para corresponder a su rama de olivo. *Fantástico.*

Así que espeto:

—A los Nationals[5] les está yendo bien esta temporada. —¿Creo? Escuché a un tipo decirlo en el autobús. Liam siempre está jugando videojuegos con sus amigos. Probablemente también le gusten los deportes.

—Vaya. Eso es… bueno. —Liam asiente.

Asiento con la cabeza.

Más asentimientos incómodos y luego silencio. Otra vez.

Bueno. Esto es demasiado incómodo. Voy a instalar sensores de movimiento en todas las habitaciones de la casa para asegurarme de que nuestros caminos nunca se vuelvan a cruzar.

—¿Puedes decirme a qué deporte pertenece ese equipo?

Levanto la vista del café que estoy revolviendo furiosamente.

—¿Mmm?

—Los Nationals. ¿Qué deporte?

—¡Ah!… —Miro alrededor de la cocina, en busca de pistas. Encuentro un gran total de ninguna—. No tengo ni idea.

Liam sumerge una bolsita de té en su taza, con un brillo de diversión en sus ojos.

—Yo tampoco.

Salimos de la habitación por puertas opuestas. Me pregunto si es consciente de que casi nos sonreímos.

[5] Washington Nationals es un equipo de béisbol

Capitulo 5

Hace cuatro meses, dos semanas

Miro por la ventana, tratando de usar mi título de ingeniera para aproximar cuántos metros de nieve cayeron durante la noche. ¿Uno? ¿Diecisiete? Lamentablemente, en mi plan de estudios de la escuela de posgrado no había ningún curso en el que te enseñaran a calcular cuánta nieve ha caído, así que me rindo y miro mi teléfono.

No hay forma de que pueda llegar al trabajo, y todo mi equipo en la EPA está en la misma situación. El auto de Sean está atascado en su camino de entrada. Alec, Josh y Evan ni siquiera pueden *llegar* a sus entradas. Ted está en su quinto chiste sobre fenómenos meteorológicos extremos. El canal de Slack suena con algunos mensajes más que maldicen todas las formas de precipitación, y luego Sean toma la decisión de que todos deberíamos trabajar desde casa. Acceder al servidor seguro desde nuestras computadoras portátiles emitidas por la EPA. Lo cual para mí es un poco problemático.

Así que le envío un mensaje de texto a Sean:

Mara: Sean, no tengo mi computadora portátil emitida por la EPA en casa.

Sean: ¿Por qué?

Mara: Todavía no me has entregado una.

Sean: Ya veo.

Sean: Bueno, entonces puedes tomarte el día para responder correos electrónicos y cosas así. Solo vamos a tratar de solucionar el problema del rociador electrostático hoy, por lo que realmente no te necesitamos.

Sean: Y la próxima vez asegúrate de recordarme que aún no tienes una computadora portátil.

¿Qué tan pasivo-agresivo sería reenviar a Sean el correo electrónico de recordatorio que le envié hace dos días? Mucho, me imagino.

Suspiro, envío una rápida respuesta con un «Lo haré» y trato de no rechinar los dientes por el hecho de que me encantaría dar mi opinión sobre el tema del rociador electrostático. En realidad, está estrechamente relacionado con mi trabajo de posgrado, pero ¿a quién engaño? Incluso si yo estuviera presente, Sean actuaría como siempre hace: tararearía cortésmente mis contribuciones, encontraría una razón trivial para descartarlas y, quince minutos después, las parafrasearía y las reafirmaría como si fueran sus propias ideas. Ted, mi aliado más cercano en el equipo, me dice que no me lo tome como algo personal, porque Sean es un idiota con casi todo el mundo. Pero sé que no me estoy imaginando que su comportamiento más atroz siempre está dirigido a mí («Me pregunto por qué», reflexiono para mis adentros, acariciando mi barbilla de mujer que trabaja en el área STEM[6]). Pero Sean es el líder del equipo, así que…

¿Dije que me encanta mi nuevo trabajo en la EPA? Tal vez mentí. O tal vez me encanta, pero odio más a Sean. Es difícil de decir.

Me paso el día haciendo el trabajo que puedo sin acceso a información clasificada, es decir, muy poco. Hablo brevemente por FaceTime con Sadie, pero ella tiene una fecha límite para un proyecto ecosostenible hippy-dippy («No he dormido en treinta y ocho horas. Por favor, átame un yunque al cuello y arrójame al mar de los Sargazos»), ni siquira puedo entrar en contacto con Hannah (probablemente está retozando con las morsas en un bloque de hielo) y… Eso es todo. Realmente no tengo otros amigos.

Probablemente debería trabajar con base a eso.

[6]El término STEM (por sus siglas en inglés) es el acrónimo de los términos en inglés Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (ciencia, tecnología, ingeniería y matemáticas)

A la una de la tarde estoy mortalmente aburrida. Tomo una siesta; Veo un video de YouTube sobre la disposición de las placas del estegosaurio. Me pinto las uñas de un bonito color rojo mate. Escribo una publicación a medias para mi blog sobre *The Bachelor*, acerca mis expectativas para la próxima temporada. Practico trenzar mi cabello en una corona. Me pregunto si soy una adicta al trabajo, decido que probablemente lo soy.

No recuerdo la última vez que me quedé en casa todo el día. Siempre he sido un poco inquieta, un poco demasiado inquieta. *Demasiado activa,* decían mis padres mientras trataban de inscribirme en todos los deportes de equipo posibles para mantenerme ocupada. No son malas personas, pero dudo que hubiesen querido tener descendencia para empezar, y estoy segura de que no eran fanáticos de los cambios que mi llegada trajo a su estilo de vida. Probablemente sea la razón por la que nunca fueron grandes fans de mi persona. Hablamos tal vez una o dos veces al año ahora, y siempre soy yo quien llama.

En fin...

Apoyo la frente contra el frío cristal de la ventana, sintiendo una extraña sensación de aislamiento, como si estuviera desconectada del mundo entero, envuelta en una capa blanca amortiguada.

Debería empezar a tener citas de nuevo.

¿Debería empezar a tener citas de nuevo?

Sí. Debería. Excepto que… hombres. No gracias. Soy muy consciente de que #NoTodosLosHombres son idiotas condescendientes como Sean, y he tenido mi parte de novios perfectamente amables que no sintieron la necesidad de corregirme con un «*En realidad*» cuando traté de tener una conversación. Pero incluso en sus mejores momentos, todas mis relaciones románticas se sentían como un trabajo. De una manera en que mi relación con Sadie, Hannah y Helena nunca se sintió. De una manera en que *el trabajo real* nunca se sintió. ¿Y para

qué? ¿Sexo? El jurado aún no sabe si puede considerarse un elemento importante.

Tal vez debería saltarme las citas y simplemente visitar a Sadie en New York tan pronto como mejore el tiempo. Sí, eso es lo que haré. Dedicaremos un fin de semana entero para ello. Patinar sobre hielo. Probar ese chocolate caliente congelado del que ha estado hablando sin parar, el que insiste no es solo un batido renombrado. Pero mientras tanto sigue nevando y yo sigo atrapada aquí. Sola.

Bueno, no *sola,* sola. Liam está cerca. Bajó las escaleras esta mañana, su mano grande rozó la suave barandilla de madera, luciendo… no del todo desaliñado. Pero no se molestó en ponerse su traje habitual. Los vaqueros descoloridos y la camiseta desgastada le hacían parecer más joven, una versión más humana de su personalidad distante y severa. O tal vez era el cabello, oscuro como siempre, pero un poco levantado en la parte de atrás. Si nos odiáramos un poco menos, me habría acercado y se lo habría arreglado. En cambio, lo vi dirigirse a la espaciosa entrada hasta que ya no se sintió tan espaciosa. Ningún techo es lo *suficientemente* alto cuando alguien tan grande como Liam se para debajo de él, aparentemente. Lo miré medio hipnotizada por unos momentos, hasta que me di cuenta de que él me estaba mirando. *Uy.* Luego miró por la ventana, suspiró profundamente y volvió a subir las escaleras. El teléfono ya estaba en su oído mientras daba instrucciones tranquilas y detalladas sobre un proyecto que probablemente tiene como objetivo liberar al planeta de las garras malvadas de las plantas fotosintéticas.

No lo he visto desde entonces, pero lo escuché. Risas aquí. Pasos descalzos allí. Madera crujiendo y el pitido del microondas. Nuestras habitaciones están a un pasillo y medio de distancia. Sé que tiene una oficina en casa, pero nunca he estado allí, algo así como una especie de situación tácita de no ir al ala oeste, muy al estilo de *La Bella y la Bestia.* He considerado husmear cuando no está en casa, pero ¿y si tiene trampas por ahí? Me lo imagino volviendo a casa y encontrándome

llorando, con mi tobillo enredado en una de ellas. Probablemente me dejaría allí para que muriera de hambre.

Además, no sale mucho. Están ese par de amigos suyos que vienen a hacer cosas sorprendentemente nerds (lo que me recuerda demasiado a mí, a Sadie y a Hannah haciendo brownies para un maratón de *Parks and Rec*, que a su vez es vagamente doloroso, así que finjo no pasa). Sus días de trabajo parecen ser de dieciséis horas, incluso cuando no estoy siendo un gremlin mezquino que se niega en redondo a recibir sus paquetes, pero eso es todo. Me pregunto si él sale. Me pregunto si él mete a escondidas a una chica diferente en la casa cada noche y le dice *Shh, cállate. Mi compañera de cuarto pelirroja y fastidiosa dañará mi tocadiscos si hacemos demasiado ruido.* Me pregunto si simplemente no me doy cuenta de las orgías enmascaradas que tiene en la cocina todos los fines de semana mientras estoy metida debajo de mi edredón de abuela, redactando cuidadosamente las publicaciones de mi blog.

Me pregunto por qué me estoy preguntando todo esto.

Cuando bajo las escaleras para cenar, la casa está oscura y silenciosa. Y fría. Honestamente, ¿cómo es que Liam no se está congelando? ¿Son los más de treinta kilos de músculos? ¿Se cubre con grasa de cría de foca? Sacudo la cabeza mientras subo el termostato y caliento más comida de la que necesito comer (pero, lo más importante: no más comida de la que *puedo* comer).

Hay algunas salas de estar y salones en el primer piso, pero mi favorita es la que está conectada a la cocina. Tiene un sofá grande y cómodo que probablemente cueste más que mi educación de posgrado, una alfombra suave que me gusta acariciar sigilosamente cuando estoy sola en casa, y la atracción principal: un televisor gigante. Muevo mis (muchos) recipientes de comida a la mesa de café de nogal y me dejo caer en el sofá.

Por razones que no entiendo, Liam paga la televisión por cable y unos quince servicios de transmisión diferentes que nunca le he visto usar. De ninguna manera estoy por encima de explotar el dinero

sangriento de FGP Corp, así que encontré una repetición de un episodio de la temporada doce de *The Bachelorette*. No es mi favorito, por razones que expliqué extensamente en mi blog (no me juzguen), pero es decente, así que me instalo.

Diez minutos más tarde, un idiota con una obvia adicción a las camas de bronceado está peleando a puñetazos con un idiota que claramente inhala proteína en polvo, todo bajo los ojos encantados de una chica, es decir, la premisa del programa. Pero me doy cuenta de que no todos los ruidos vienen del televisor. Cuando lo silencio, puedo escuchar otra pelea. Desde arriba. En la voz de Liam.

No es lo suficientemente fuerte como para distinguir lo esencial, pero me las arreglo para escuchar las palabras ocasionales. *Mal. Poco ético ¿Oposición,* tal vez? *No*s firmes, pero eso es todo. Después de un breve momento, los sonidos vuelven a amortiguarse. Otro minuto, y una puerta se cierra; escucho el sonido de pies bajan rápidamente los escalones.

Mierda.

Considero cambiar rápidamente a una película de Lars Von Trier, pero Liam llega antes de que pueda engañarlo haciéndole creer que soy una intelectual. Levanto la vista de mi rollo de huevo y él está allí, en la parte de la cocina que puedo ver desde el sofá, luciendo como si… estuviese a punto de cometer asesinato.

Es decir: más de lo habitual.

Mi primer instinto es aplanarme contra el sofá, seguir viendo mi programa basura y comiendo mi excelente comida. Pero se da la vuelta, nuestros ojos se encuentran, y no tengo más remedio que saludarlo vacilante. Él responde con un breve asentimiento, y… se ve melancólico y oscuro, como si hubiera tenido diez minutos terribles, tal vez un día terrible. Peor aún, parece que está listo para desquitarse con la primera persona que encuentre en su camino, que, dadas las

condiciones climáticas, lamentablemente seré yo. Parece que necesita una distracción, y una idea muy estúpida me viene a la cabeza.

No lo hagas, Mara. No lo hagas. Te vas a arrepentir.

Pero Liam está apretando los dientes visiblemente. La forma en que mira el refrigerador abierto sugiere que le gustaría estrangular todos y cada uno de los frascos de salsa tártara (por razones desconocidas, tiene tres). Puede que el kétchup también esté en riesgo de ser estrangulado. La línea de sus anchos hombros está tan tensa que podría usarla como un nivel de burbuja y…

Ah, a la mierda.

—Así que. —Me aclaro la garganta—. Ordené mucha más comida de la que necesito. —Resisto el impulso de cubrir mi incomodidad con una risa nerviosa. Probablemente pueda oler mi terror abyecto—. ¿Quieres un poco?

Cierra lentamente la puerta del frigorífico y se da la vuelta.

—¿Disculpa? —Me mira como si le hubiera sugerido que fuéramos a robar un banco juntos. Que nos hiciéramos amigos. Que nos registrásemos en yoga aéreo. O que pasáramos el resto de la noche observando polillas.

—Comida para llevar... China. ¿Quieres un poco?

Él mira a la ventana. Sí, todavía está nevando. Somos oficialmente el Polo Norte.

—Pediste comida para llevar. —Suena dudoso.

—Hoy no. Hace dos días. Siempre pido demasiado, porque las sobras saben mejor. Especialmente el *Lo mein*, realmente necesita empaparse en la salsa para… —Me detengo y me sonrojo—. De todos modos, ¿te gustaría comer un poco?

—Estamos en medio de una tormenta de nieve, Mara. —¿Por qué estoy temblando de repente? Ah, sí. Porque hace frío. No porque haya dicho mi nombre—. Deberías estar acaparando tu comida.

Sí, debería.

—Está a punto de echarse a perder. Así que estoy feliz de compartir.

Liam tarda un tiempo desmesurado en responder. Diez buenos segundos en los que me mira con escepticismo, quizá sospechando que soy una asesina desquiciada a la caza de compañeros de piso para envenenar. Finalmente dice:

—Claro, por qué no.

Suena inseguro, muy cauteloso. También luce cauteloso, mientras se dirige hacia mí. Desliza sus manos en los bolsillos traseros de sus jeans y mira a su alrededor malhumorado, y es obvio que no tiene idea de qué hacer: sentarse en el sofá, la silla, el piso. Comer de pie en medio de la sala de estar. Se me ocurre por primera vez que toda su personalidad distante y severa podría esconder una pizca de incomodidad. ¿Será una de esas personas hiperconfiadas en el ámbito profesional y todo lo contrario en la vida social? No. Improbable.

Palmeo un lugar al lado del mío, ya me arrepiento de esto. Nunca nos hemos sentado juntos antes. Hasta ahora, cada interacción entre nosotros ha sido circunstancial. El acto de sentarse uno al lado del otro implica intencionalidad y una mayor duración. Un nuevo territorio.

Se siente extraño.

Liam es tan pesado y alto que el cojín se hunde cuando se sienta, y tengo que tensar mis abdominales y reajustarlos para evitar deslizarme hacia él. Le entrego un plato y un par de palillos, fingiendo que nada de esto es inusual. Él hace lo mismo mientras los acepta con un breve asentimiento, sus dedos nunca tocan los míos accidentalmente.

—¿Qué estás viendo? —pregunta.

—*The Bachelorette*. —Ni rastro de reconocimiento—. Es este programa estúpido e *increíble.* Un reality. No tienes que mirarlo conmigo. Sálvate mientras puedas. —Sorprendentemente, Liam se queda. Todavía luce como si quisiera destrozar toda la casa, pero su expresión es un poco menos sedienta de sangre. ¿Un pequeño progreso?—. Sheryl, la chica del vestido verde, la única chica, tiene algunas semanas para elegir marido entre todos los chicos.

Liam entrecierra los ojos en la televisión por un momento.

—¿Basándose en qué? Todos me parecen iguales.

—Lo hacen, ¿verdad? —Me encojo de hombros—. La llevan a citas. Y charlan. Hacia el final, incluso podrían tener relaciones sexuales.

¿Se está sonrojando? No. Es solo la luz.

—¿En la pantalla?

—Oye, es un programa de la cadena ABC, no de HBO. —Pongo un rollito primavera en su plato. Luego lo miro: sus brazos llenando su camisa, su pecho, su enormidad general, y añado dos más. ¿Cuántos millones de calorías necesita al día? Debería averiguarlo. En nombre de la ciencia—. ¿Ves al tipo usando anteojos que obviamente no necesita con la vana esperanza de parecer menos imbécil?

—¿Camisa azul?

—Sí. A ese es al que apoyamos.

—Muy bien.

—Sí. Porque es de Michigan; y yo hice la licenciatura en la Universidad de Michigan —explico, lamiendo una gota de salsa hoisin de mi pulgar. Sus ojos se demoran en mis labios por un momento demasiado largo, luego se apartan abruptamente.

—Ya veo.

—Es un sitio genial. ¿Alguna vez fuiste?

—No lo creo, no. —Todavía no me mira. ¿Quizás siente un odio profundo e irracional por Ann Arbor?

—¿Dónde estudiaste la universidad?

Parece levemente sorprendido de que le pregunte. Es justo, ya que en el pasado no he destacado precisamente por tomar turnos y entablar conversaciones con él.

— Dartmouth. Luego, la Facultad de Derecho de Harvard.

—Oh. —Asiento a sabiendas—. Eso no suena… barato.

Tiene la decencia de parecer avergonzado, así que me compadezco de él.

—¿Quieres un poco de pollo con anacardos?

—Eh... Sí, por favor.

—Aquí tienes. Puedes comértelo todo, yo ya he comido como cinco kilos de eso.

Él asiente.

—Gracias.

Liam Harding. Siendo cortés. Guau.

—De nada.

Durante un par de minutos nos quedamos en silencio: Liam mira la televisión, yo observo a escondidas a Liam mientras come vorazmente, grandes y rápidos bocados que resultan juvenilmente entrañables. Entonces se vuelve hacia mí.

—Mara.

—¿Sí?

—Claramente eres una especie de genio.

¿Oh? ¿Lo soy?

—¿Esto… te estás burlando de mí?

Se ve muy serio y levemente ofendido ante la idea.

—Eres básicamente una científica espacial.

—*Básicamente* es la palabra clave.

—Y Helena, que tenía unos estándares ridículos, te eligió a ti para trabajar con ella. Eres obviamente extraordinaria.

Oh Dios. ¿Es esto un cumplido? ¿Me voy a sonrojar?

—Em… ¿Gracias?

Asiente.

—Lo que no entiendo es, ¿por qué alguien tan inteligente como tú está viendo esta mierda?

Sonrío en mi arroz frito.

—Ya lo verás.

Una hora más tarde, cuando Sheryl dice:

—Creo que nuestra relación ha avanzado mucho, pero no estoy convencida de que pueda desarrollarse más…

Golpeo mi mano en mi reposabrazos y grito: «Oh, vamos, Sheryl» justo cuando Liam golpea su reposabrazos y grita: «Sheryl. ¿Qué demonios?»

Nos volvemos el uno al otro e intercambiamos una mirada breve y desconcertada. *Te lo dije*, pienso con una sonrisa. Su boca se tuerce, como si me hubiera escuchado alto y claro.

—…En este punto, solo sé que no va a funcionar entre nosotros. ¿Puedo acompañarte?

Liam niega con la cabeza, horrorizado.

—Esa es una muy mala decisión.

—Lo sé.

—Es el mejor de todos.

—Es taaaan estúpida, ¿verdad? Se va a arrepentir muchísimo de esto. Lo sé, porque ya he visto la temporada. —*Múltiples* veces. Alcanzo una de las cervezas que Liam sacó de la nevera hace unos minutos—. ¿Quieres otro rangoon de cangrejo? —pregunto.

Él asiente y se recuesta, sus largas piernas estiradas junto a las mías sobre la mesa de café. La nieve afuera sigue cayendo, y esperamos a que comience el próximo episodio.

* * *

Liam palea la nieve fuera del camino como si fuera su única vocación.

Tal vez sea la locura inducida por el aislamiento la que habla, pero hay algo hipnótico al respecto. El rítmico ascenso y descenso de sus hombros bajo su abrigo negro. La forma aparentemente sin esfuerzo en que lo ha estado haciendo durante horas, deteniéndose ocasionalmente para secarse el sudor de la frente con la parte posterior de la manga. Presiono mi frente contra la ventana y solo… lo miro fijamente. Casi puedo escuchar la voz de Helena en mi cabeza (*¿Te gustaría tomar prestados mis binoculares de observación de aves?*). La ignoro alegremente.

Tal vez eso es en lo que se especializó en Dartmouth: palear nieve. Muy bien complementado con una especialización en Músculos. Su tesis seguramente se tituló: *La importancia de los brazos en la excavación ergonómica.* Luego se mudó a la escuela de posgrado para estudiar la ley de *Cómo Hacer que una Tarea de Invierno Mundana se vea Atractiva*. Y aquí estoy, incapaz de apartar la vista de una década de educación superior sobrepagada.

Esto se está poniendo raro. Me está trayendo recuerdos de la primera vez que lo vi, cuando sus ojos oscuros y esos hombros (francamente ridículos) me golpearon como un ladrillo en la cabeza. No es un recuerdo que quiera volver a visitar, así que miro hacia otro

lado y bajo las escaleras para hacer el almuerzo, culpando a mi locura temporal por haberme saltado el desayuno. Esto es lo que me pasa por quedarme dormida tarde anoche, justo a la mitad de la final, en medio de explicarle a Liam entre bostezos que los concursantes de *The Bachelor* y *The Bachelorette* se someten a exámenes de detección de enfermedades de transmisión sexual obligatorios. Eso es lo que obtengo por despertarme esta mañana en el sofá, con una suave manta de olor celestial sobre mí. Me pregunto de dónde vino, de todos modos. No de la sala de estar. Estoy segura de que no había una alrededor.

No es que Liam y yo seamos amigos ahora. No lo conozco mejor que ayer, excepto, supongo, que tiene algunas opiniones sorprendentemente válidas en lo que respecta a los reality shows. Pero por alguna razón imposible de analizar, cuando empiezo a trabajar en mi sopa me encuentro haciendo suficiente para dos.

¿¡Ves!? Esta es la razón por la cual los humanos no están destinados a ser secuestrados en casa. El aburrimiento y la soledad convierten sus mentes en avena blanda, y comienzan a imponer su comida mal cocinada a los desprevenidos Abogados de la Nieve. Y aparentemente estoy aceptando mi rareza, porque cuando Liam entra, cabello oscuro húmedo y rizado por los copos de nieve que se derriten, las mejillas brillantes por el ejercicio, le digo:

—Hice el almuerzo. —Me mira fijamente, con los brazos colgando a los costados, como si no supiera cómo responder. Así que agrego—: Para los dos. Como agradecimiento. Por hacer eso. La paleada, quiero decir. —Él me mira un poco más—. Si quieres. No es obligatorio.

—No, no, yo… —No termina. Pero cuando se da cuenta de que me acerco a tomar los tazones de un estante alto, viene detrás de mí y deja dos en el mostrador.

—Gracias.

—No hay problema. —Podría estar imaginándome esto, pero creo que lo escucho inhalar lentamente antes de alejarse. ¿Mi cabello huele mal? Lo lavé ayer. ¿Me ha fallado finalmente Garnier Fructis después de años de fiel servicio? Me estoy preguntando si es hora de cambiar a Pantene para cuando estamos comiendo cortésmente en la mesa de la cocina, uno frente al otro, como si fuéramos una familia joven en un comercial de Campbell.

Problema: sin la televisión encendida, se nota bastante que no tenemos nada de qué hablar. Liam me mira cada pocos segundos, como si el hecho de que me atiborre a comida sea algo que le gusta mirar o algo totalmente horrible, ¿quién podría decirlo? A medida que se extiende el silencio, una vez más me arrepiento de cada elección que he hecho. Y cuando suena su teléfono, estoy tan aliviada que siento ganas de levantar el puño en señal de victoria.

Excepto que no contesta. Comprueba el identificador de llamadas (*FGP Corp—Mitch*), pone los ojos en blanco y luego gira el teléfono en un movimiento desdeñoso que me hace reír.

Liam me da una mira con desconcierto.

—Lo siento. No fue mi intención reírme… Solo… —Me encojo de hombros—. Es bueno saber que también odias a tus colegas.

Levanta una ceja.

—¿Odias a tus colegas?

—Bueno no. No los odio. Quiero decir, *a veces* los odio, pero… —¿Por qué se trata de *mí?*—. De todos modos, ¿crees que haya acabado de nevar?

—¿Por qué odias a tus colegas *a veces*?

—Yo no. No quise decirlo de esa forma. Es solo… —Liam ha dejado de comer y me mira como si realmente estuviera interesado. *Puaj*—. Son todos hombres. Todos ingenieros. Y los hombres ingenieros pueden llegar a ser... sí. Soy la recién llegada, todos eran amigos antes

de que apareciera en escena. Y estoy bastante segura de que Sean, mi jefe, piensa que soy una especie de contratación de diversidad por lástima. Cosa que no soy. De hecho, soy una muy buena ingeniera. Tengo que serlo, o Helena me habría masacrado mientras dormía.

Él asiente como si entendiera.

—Te habría masacrado estando despierta.

—¿Verdad? Ella no era exactamente piadosa. Y no me quejo, le debo mucho. Realmente me ayudó a convertirme en una mejor científica, pero todos en mi equipo me tratan como si fuera una ingeniera novata que no sabe lo que es un ohmio y… —¿Por qué *sigo hablando?*—. Bueno, todos excepto Ted, pero no estoy segura de si realmente me respeta o solo está tratando de conseguir algo de sexo, porque ya me invitó a salir tres veces, lo que hace que las cosas sean un poco incómodas…

El rostro de Liam se endurece instantáneamente. Su cuchara se asienta en el cuenco con un fuerte tintineo.

—Eso es acoso sexual.

—Oh, no.

—Como mínimo, es una conducta muy inapropiada.

—No, no es así…

—Puedo hablar con él.

Parpadeo.

—¿Qué?

—¿Cuál es su apellido? —pregunta Liam, como si fuera una pregunta totalmente normal—. Puedo hablar con él. Explicarle que te ha hecho sentir incómoda y que debería dejar de…

—¿Qué? —Suelto una carcajada—. Liam, no voy a decirte su apellido. ¿Qué vas a hacer, verter un barril de petróleo en su casa?

Mira hacia otro lado. Como si fuera una opción.

—No, yo… De hecho, me agrada Ted. Él es amable. Quiero decir, incluso he considerado decir que sí. ¿Por qué no, verdad? —*¿Por qué no?* es lo que diría Helena, pero la expresión de Liam se ensombrece ante eso. O tal vez es mi alma entera, oscureciéndose ante la idea de ponerme delineador de ojos para salir con un chico que está perfectamente bien y me excita tanto como las espinacas hervidas—. Es solo que… —Me encojo de hombros. ¿Cómo explicar que nunca me inspiran los hombres que conozco? Ni siquiera me molestaré en hacerlo. No es como si le importara—. Gracias, sin embargo —agrego.

Parece que quisiera insistir, pero solo dice:

—Avísame si cambias de opinión.

—Um. Okey. —¿Supongo que ahora tengo una montaña de músculos de un metro noventa de mi lado? Es un poco agradable. Debería hacer sopa más a menudo—. Entonces, ya que te tengo aquí —*y para evitar volver a caer en un silencio incómodo*—, ¿qué pasa con las fotos?

—¿Las fotos?

—Las fotos en blanco y negro de árboles y lagos y esas cosas. Colgando literalmente de cada pared.

—Simplemente me gusta tomarlas.

—Espera. ¿Tomaste las fotos tú mismo?

—Sí.

—¿Significa que en realidad has estado en todos esos lugares?

Traga una cucharada de sopa, asintiendo.

—Son principalmente parques nacionales. Unos cuantos estatales. Algunos de Canadá también.

Estoy un poco sorprendida. No solo las imágenes son buenas, de nivel profesional, sino que también…

—Está bien —señalo el marco detrás de la mesa, un arco de Mobius en lo que parece Sierra Nevada—, ese no es el trabajo de alguien que odia el medio ambiente.

Me da una mirada perpleja.

—¿Yo odio el medio ambiente?

—¡Sí! —Parpadeo—. ¿No?

Se encoge de hombros.

—Puede que no haga abono con mis propias heces ni aguante la respiración para evitar emitir CO_2, pero me gusta la naturaleza.

Estoy un poco estupefacta.

—¿Liam? ¿Puedo hacerte una pregunta que posiblemente haga que quieras tirarme el cuenco de sopa a la cabeza?

—No será así.

—No has escuchado la pregunta.

—Pero la sopa es realmente buena.

Sonrío. E inmediatamente me siento cohibida por la oleada de calidez que surge dentro de mí al saber que le gusta mi comida. ¿A quién le importa si lo hace? Es un tipo al azar. Es Liam Harding. En notas oficiales, lo odio.

—Dijiste que realmente respetabas el trabajo de Helena. Y que ella era tu tía favorita. Y que eran cercanos. Pero trabajas en FGP Corp, y me he estado preguntando…

—¿Cómo sigo vivo?

Me río.

—Más o menos.

—No estoy muy seguro de por qué me perdonó.

—Un poco fuera de lugar, ¿no?

—Escondía los cuchillos afilados cada vez que me visitaba. Pero se centró principalmente en enviarme mensajes de texto diarios sobre todo el mal que FGP Corp está haciendo en el mundo. ¿Tal vez iba por una rutina lenta?

—Yo solo… No entiendo cómo amas a Helena y la naturaleza *y* trabajas en una empresa que presiona para eliminar los impuestos al carbono como si su objetivo fuera sumergir a la civilización en una oscuridad ardiente.

Él suelta una carcajada.

—¿Crees que *disfruto* trabajando allí?

—Supuse que lo harías. Porque parece que trabajas todo el tiempo. —Me sonrojo, está bien, tengo su horario memorizado, demándame, pero a él no parece importarle—. Tú… ¿no lo haces?

—No. Es una empresa de mierda y odio todo lo que representa.

—Oh. Entonces porque… —Me rasco la nariz. Vaya. No esperaba eso—. Eres abogado. ¿No puedes, um, ejercer en otra parte?

—Es complicado.

—¿Complicado?

La cuchara raspa el fondo del recipiente por un momento.

—Mi mentor me reclutó.

—¿Tu mentor?

—Fue uno de mis profesores. Le debo mucho: me ayudó a organizar todas mis pasantías, me aconsejó durante la facultad de derecho. Cuando me pidió que tomara este trabajo, no sentí que pudiera decir que no. Es mi jefe ahora, y… —Se recuesta en su silla y se pasa una mano por el cabello. Cansado. Se ve muy cansado—. Tengo muchos

sentimientos en conflicto respecto a lo que hace FGP Corp. Y no me gusta la empresa, ni su misión. Pero al final, es bueno que esté cerca. Si no fuera yo, otra persona haría mi trabajo igual de bien. Y al menos puedo estar ahí para el equipo que dirijo. Y hacer de intermediario entre ellos y mi jefe cuando sea necesario.

Pienso en las palabras que escuché anoche. *Poco ético. Mal.*

—¿Es él con quien estabas discutiendo? ¿Por teléfono? —Levanta una ceja y mis mejillas se calientan—. ¡Te prometo que no estaba escuchando a escondidas! —Pero Liam se encoge de hombros como si no le importara. Así que sonrío, inclinándome hacia adelante sobre la mesa—. Está bien, tal vez lo estaba. Solo un poco. Entonces, ¿cuál es su apellido?

—¿De quién?

—El de tu jefe. ¿Tal vez *pueda* hablar con *él* mientras *tú* hablas con *Ted?* ¿Algún buen y viejo acoso por poder recíproco? ¿Advertencia mutua? ¿Deja a mi amigo en paz?

Entonces me sonríe, una sonrisa plena y real. Su primera en mi presencia, creo, y hace que el echo natural de respirar sea mucho más difícil y la temperatura de la habitación mucho más caliente. ¿Por qué es tan guapo? Lo miro fijamente, sin palabras, sin poder hacer otra cosa que fijarme en el claro color marrón de sus ojos, en la forma en que se estiran sus labios, en el hecho de que parece estudiarme con una expresión cálida y amable, y...

Nuestros ojos se lanzan a su teléfono. Que vuelve a sonar.

—¿Trabajo? —pregunto. Mi voz es ronca.

—No. Es… —Se levanta de la mesa y se aclara la garganta—. Perdóname. Vuelvo enseguida.

Mientras sale, lo escucho reírse. Al otro lado del teléfono, una voz femenina dice su nombre.

Capítulo 6

Hace cuatro meses

Salgo de la ducha con cuidado, dejando que los dedos de mis pies se hundan en la gruesa y suave alfombra. Resulta ser una elección letalmente mala, porque lo hago en el mismo momento en que Liam abre la puerta del baño para dar un paso dentro.

Eso me lleva a saltar. Y a agitarme. Y a gritar:

—¡Aaaaaaaaah!

—¿Mara? Qué…

—¡Aaah!

—Lo siento, yo no…

Todo mi cuerpo está resbaladizo y frenético; no es una buena combinación. Casi pierdo el equilibrio tratando de envolver la cortina de la ducha a mi alrededor. Luego *pierdo* el equilibrio y estoy segura de que Liam puede verlo todo.

El ombligo abierto del que Hannah siempre se burla.

La cicatriz de lacrosse en forma de hoz sobre mi teta derecha.

Dicha teta derecha, *y* la izquierda.

Por una fracción de segundo ambos permanecemos inmóviles. Mirándonos el uno al otro. Incapaz de reaccionar. Entonces digo:

—¿Puedes, podrías, um, pasarme esa toalla de allí?

—Ah, claro. Aquí tienes. Yo…

Extiende su brazo y gira hacia el otro lado mientras envuelvo la toalla (su toalla, la toalla de Liam) a mi alrededor. Es esponjosa y

limpia y huele bien y, ¿quién usa toallas negras? ¿Quién los produce? ¿Dónde los compra, *Baños Sangrientos y Más*?

—¿Mara? —Está parado debajo del marco de la puerta, deliberadamente apartando la mirada de mí.

—¿Sí?

—¿Por qué estás en mi baño?

Mierda.

—Lo siento. Lo siento mucho Mi ducha no funciona, y… Creo que hay un problema con una de las tuberías, y… No lo sé, pero llamé a Bob.

—¿Bob?

—El fontanero. Bueno, *un* fontanero. Vendrá mañana por la mañana.

—Vaya.

—Pero salí a correr antes, y estaba toda sudorosa y maloliente, así que…

—Ya veo.

—Lo siento. Debería haber preguntado antes. Puedes darte la vuelta ahora, por cierto. Ya estoy decente.

Liam se gira. Pero solo después de unos diez segundos de lo que parece un debate interno bastante intenso. Sus expresiones nunca son las más fáciles de leer, pero parece un poco nervioso.

Mucho, en realidad. Incluso más de lo que yo lo estoy.

Lo cual es extraño. Es a mí a quién acaban de ver desnuda, y probablemente Liam esté muy acostumbrado a estar con mujeres desnudas. Es decir, mujeres *realmente* desnudas. Mucho más desnudas de lo que estoy actualmente. Seamos realistas: es probable que su ex sea un ángel de Victoria's Secret que recientemente dejó de modelar para terminar un doctorado en historia del arte y convertirse en

restauradora junior en el Smithsonian. Tiene un ombligo impecable y sabe qué botón del PlayStation apretar para lanzar una granada. ¿Dije *su ex?* Todavía están saliendo, por lo que sé. Tienen una vida sexual muy atlética. Estoy hablando de juegos de rol y juguetes. Acción a tope. Mucho oral, en el que ambos sobresalen. Está bien, este tren de pensamientos necesita estrellarse ahora mismo.

¿Tal vez solo siente vergüenza ajena? No es que deba estarlo. Soy bonita. Quiero decir, *creo* que soy bonita. Linda, pecosa, desearía-ser-dos-pulgadas-más-alta, un poco-consciente-de-esa-joroba-en-mi-nariz. A veces, normalmente después de que Sadie me ha puesto delineador de ojos, incluso creo que soy hermosa. Pero nunca seré tan atractiva como Liam. ¿Es por eso que está haciendo esta cosa extraña, mirándome mientras obviamente hace todo lo posible por no mirar?

—Siento mucho no haberte advertido. Pensé que estabas fuera de la ciudad o algo así. Porque no viniste a casa anoche, y…

Me siento un poco avergonzada de haberlo notado. Pero ¿cómo podría no hacerlo? Desde la tormenta de nieve, hemos entrado en este ritmo extraño. Cenar juntos a las siete. No es que haya un acuerdo reconocido ni nada, pero sé desde antes que él solía comer un poco más tarde, y sé por toda mi vida que yo solía comer un poco antes, y de alguna manera convergimos en un momento que funciona para ambos… Tal vez estuve cerca de enviarle un mensaje de texto anoche. Pero decidí no hacerlo, porque parecía cruzar algún tipo de línea tácita.

—No, yo solo… Tuve que quedarme en el trabajo. Por un plazo. Iba a avisarte, pero… —*¿No querías cruzar algún tipo de línea tácita?* Quiero preguntar. Pero uno no habla de cosas tácitas, así que solo voy con:

—Por supuesto. —Me aclaro la garganta—. Iré a mi habitación. A vestirme.

—Bien.

Hago el amago de irme. Excepto que Liam sigue parado allí, bloqueando la salida. La única salida, si no se cuenta la ventana, que

considero brevemente antes de reconocer que no es una opción factible. No en mi actual estado de desconexión.

—Estás… —No parece entender *dónde* está. Le haría gestos y señalaría para que se diera cuenta que necesita salir del camino, pero tengo que agarrar mi toalla con ambas manos para evitar volver a impactarlo, y

—Vaya. Oh, cierto, yo… —Da un gran paso hacia un lado. Demasiado grande, básicamente está pegado al fregadero ahora.

—Bien. Gracias de nuevo por dejarme usar tu baño.

—No hay problema.

Realmente debería irme ahora.

—Y tomé prestado un poco de tu champú. Bueno, robé. No es como si alguna vez fuera a devolverlo. Pero, ya sabes.

—Está bien.

—Me encanta Old Spice, por cierto. Excelente elección.

—Oh. —Liam mira a todos lados menos a mí—. Solo tomo el primero que veo en la tienda.

Sé en ese momento, simplemente lo sé, que Old Spice es la marca favorita de productos de higiene personal de William K. Harding, y que sufre una profunda vergüenza por ello.

—Correcto. Por supuesto. —Puede ser adorable, a veces—. Oye, solo para tu información, no estoy avergonzada. Así que tú tampoco deberías estarlo.

—¿Qué?

—No me importa que me hayas visto desnuda. Porque sé que no te importa. Solo digo que no tenemos que ser raros al respecto. Créeme —me río—, sé que no vas a usar las diminutas tetas pecosas de tu

molesta compañera de piso pelirroja como material para el banco de placer.

Espero que responda con una broma, como suele hacer, pero no lo hace. Él no responde en absoluto, de hecho. Simplemente aprieta los labios, asiente una vez y, de repente, las cosas se sienten aún más incómodas. *Mierda.*

—De todas formas. Gracias de nuevo.

—De nada.

Salgo con un pequeño gesto y me doy cuenta de dos cosas: está mirando fijamente a sus pies, y su mano izquierda es un puño apretado a su lado.

Capitulo 7

Hace tres meses

No hay nada malo con la guía de ondas. Eso, lo sé con seguridad. El transformador y el agitador también parecen estar bien, lo que me hace pensar que el problema esté en el magnetrón. Ahora, no soy realmente una experta, pero espero que si jugueteo con el filamento, el ensamblaje se arreglará solo y…

—¿Esto es porque anoche vimos *Transformers?*

Miro hacia arriba. Liam, con una suave sonrisa en su rostro, está parado al otro lado de la isla de la cocina, observando las partes del microondas que meticulosamente coloqué sobre la encimera de mármol.

Puede que haya hecho un gran desorden.

—Era esto o escribir un fanfiction sobre Optimus Prime.

Él asiente.

—Buena elección, entonces.

—Pero además, tu microondas no funciona. Estoy tratando de arreglarlo.

—Puedo comprar uno nuevo. —Su cabeza se inclina. Estudia los componentes con el ceño ligeramente fruncido—. ¿Esto es seguro?

Me pongo rígida.

—¿Estás preguntando porque soy mujer y, por lo tanto, no puedo hacer nada remotamente científico sin causar contaminación radiactiva? Porque si es así, yo…

—Pregunto porque *no* sabría por dónde empezar, y porque *soy* tan ignorante acerca de cualquier cosa remotamente científica que podrías estar construyendo una bomba atómica y yo no sería capaz de notarlo —dice con calma. Como si ni siquiera necesitara ponerse a la defensiva, porque la idea de que yo sea una chica de cerebro insignificante ni siquiera se le pasó por la cabeza—. Pero claramente puedes. —Una pausa—. Por favor, no construyas una bomba atómica.

—No me digas lo que tengo que hacer.

Él suspira.

—Haré sitio para el plutonio en el cajón del queso.

Me río y me doy cuenta de que es la primera vez que lo hago en horas. Lo que, a su vez, me hace suspirar.

—Es solo… Sean se está comportando como un idiota total. Otra vez.

Su expresión se oscurece con comprensión.

—¿Qué hizo?

—Lo normal. ¿Ese proyecto del que te hablé? Le estaba explicando esta idea realmente genial sobre cómo solucionarlo, pero solo me dejó hablar durante medio minuto antes de decirme por qué no funcionaría. —Jugueteo con el magnetrón y empiezo a montar de nuevo el microondas. En el momento en que ambas manos están ocupadas, un mechón de cabello decide caer en mi ojo izquierdo. Lo soplo—. La cuestión es que ya había considerado todas sus objeciones y encontrado soluciones. ¿Pero me dejó continuar? No. Así que ahora vamos con un método mucho menos elegante y… —Me aclaro. En este punto, Liam recibe de mi parte de dos a cuatro diatribas relacionadas con Sean a la semana. Lo menos que puedo hacer es mantenerlas cortas—. De todas formas. Siento haberme puesto a la defensiva.

—Mara. Deberías denunciarlo.

—Lo sé. Es solo… este comportamiento de menosprecio constante es tan difícil de probar, y… —Me encojo de hombros, mala idea, ya que

mi cabello ahora está de vuelta en mis ojos. Me siento un poco atascada. Muy atascada.

—Entonces, ¿cuál es el apellido de Sean? —pregunta Liam.

—¿Por qué?

—Solo curiosidad. —Intenta sonar casual, pero lo hace muy mal. Claramente es el peor mentiroso del mundo. ¿Cómo se graduó de la facultad de derecho? Me hace sonreír cada vez.

—Tienes que practicar —digo, apuntándolo con mi destornillador.

—¿Practicar?

—Practicar al decir…

Mi voz se interrumpe. Porque Liam se acerca para rozar con sus dedos mi pómulo, con una leve sonrisa en los labios. Mi cerebro sufre un cortocircuito. ¿Qué...? ¿Él acaba de...?

Vaya. *Oh.* Mi pelo. Mi mechón de cabello perdido y rebelde. Lo metió detrás de mi oreja. Solo está siendo amable y ayudando a su compañera de cuarto pelirroja y torpe, quien a su vez se está tirando un gran pedo cerebral. *Cuanta clase, Mara. Muy elegante.*

—¿Practicar decir qué? —pregunta, sin dejar de mirar la concha de mi oreja. Probablemente esté deforme, y nunca lo supe.

—Nada. Al decir mentiras. Yo… —Me aclaro la garganta. *Cálmate, Floyd*—. Oye, ¿sabes qué? —Trato de mantener mi tono ligero. Cambiar el tema—. El comienzo de esta convivencia fue una absoluta pesadilla, pero esto me gusta mucho.

—¿Esto?

—Esta cosa. —Comienzo a atornillar la placa trasera del microondas—. Donde conversamos sin tirarnos sillas y tú despreocupadamente preguntas los apellidos de los tipos que son malos conmigo con la idea obvia de cometer actos no autorizados de justicia por mano propia contra ellos.

—Eso no es lo que…

Levanto mi ceja. Se sonroja y mira hacia otro lado.

—De todos modos, me gusta mucho más esto. Ser amigos, supongo.

Él me mira.

—*No* soy tu amigo.

—Oh. —Casi retrocedo. Casi—. Vaya. Yo… lo siento. No quise dar a entender que…

—La otra noche, Eileen le dio una rosa a Bernie y dijiste que era una buena jugada. Eso no es algo que pueda aceptar de un amigo.

Me echo a reír.

—Vamos, es lindo. Es un entrenador de perros. ¡Le gusta el K-pop!

—¿Ves? La razón por la que eres mi enemiga jurada.

Sacude la cabeza en desaprobación, y me río con más fuerza, y luego mi risa se apaga y por un segundo solo estamos sonriendo el uno al otro y una calidez líquida desconocida se derrama dentro de mí.

—Estoy *segura* de que Helena habría apoyado a Bernie.

Él resopla.

—Lo dices como si fuera una ratificación. Como si no tratara constantemente de emparejarme con gente al azar que no me interesa en absoluto.

—¡Hacía lo mismo conmigo!

—Y cuando era adolescente, salió con un tipo que había estado en huelga de duchas durante cuatro meses.

—Oh Dios. ¿Por qué?

—No estoy seguro. ¿El medio ambiente?

—No, ¿por qué estaba saliendo con él?

Liam se estremece.

—Aparentemente, y cito textualmente, "tenían una química carnal asombrosa".

Contemplo morbosamente la vida sexual de Helena hasta que Liam rompe el silencio y pregunta:

—¿Alguna vez pensaste en cambiar de trabajo?

Niego con la cabeza.

—Es la EPA. Donde siempre quise estar. En serio, la Mara, de quince años, viajaría en el tiempo para darme una paliza si lo dejara. —Sin embargo, creo que capté una nota extraña en su pregunta—. ¿Por qué preguntas? ¿*Alguna vez* has pensado en cambiar de trabajo?

Él también niega con la cabeza.

—No podría —dice. Pero estoy empezando a conocerlo, un poco.

Estoy más en sintonía con sus estados de ánimo, sus pensamientos, la forma en que se encierra en sí mismo cada vez que considera algo serio. Hay una especie de muro que construye entre él y todos los que intentan conocerlo. A veces desearía que no existiera. Así que lo empujo suavemente y pregunto:

—¿Cómo van las cosas en el trabajo?

Se queda en silencio durante un rato, con las manos apretadas contra la isla, mirándome en silencio mientras termino de atornillar las piezas. Mi cabello permanece escondido de forma segura detrás de mi oreja.

—Me pidió que despidiera a alguien hoy.

—Vaya. —Ya sé a quién se refiere. Mitch. El jefe de Liam. A quien odio en privado con la intensidad de mil hornos de microondas. Es la razón por la que Liam siente que no puede empacar sus títulos de posgrado a precio de órgano del mercado negro y sus años de experiencia como un malvado abogado corporativo y encontrar otro trabajo—. ¿Por qué?

—Alguien en mi equipo cometió un error realmente estúpido. Pero reparable. Y aun así… es solo un error. Todos nos equivocamos, sé *que yo también* cometo errores. —Se frota distraídamente el dorso de la mano contra los labios—. Realmente pensé que podría disuadirlo.

Sacude la cabeza y yo frunzo el ceño. Y presiono mis labios juntos. Me ordeno contar hasta cinco antes de decir algo, solo para evitar ser intrusiva o agresiva. Cinco, cuatro, tres…

—Honestamente, tu jefe es una pepita de mierda que no te merece y deberías renunciar y dejar que revuelva su propio caldo de mierda.

Liam mira hacia arriba, sorprendido. Y divertido, creo.

—¿Una pepita de mierda?

Me ruborizo.

—Un insulto valioso pero subestimado. Pero Liam, de verdad, mereces tener un trabajo mejor. Y antes de que señales que es hipócrita de mi parte decirte que cambies de trabajo cuando yo no lo he hecho, permíteme decirte que es una situación totalmente diferente. *Amo* mi trabajo, simplemente odio a las personas con las que tengo que hacerlo. Incluyendo a Sean. Especialmente Sean. Realmente, sobre todo a Sean. —Oh, cómo me encantaría hervir mis calcetines después de correr, hacer una sopa con ellos y luego dársela a Sean.

—Podrías pedir una transferencia.

—Planeo hacerlo. Pero no ayudará. —Me encojo de hombros y vuelvo a enchufar el microondas—. La EPA va a abrir una nueva unidad. Estoy solicitando ser transferida, pero Sean El Idiota, también. —Pongo los ojos en blanco—. Es imposible deshacerse de él. Es como un hongo parásito en las uñas de los pies.

—¿Así que estarás compitiendo contra él por el puesto?

—Bueno no. Está solicitando ser el líder del equipo. Yo estaría entre la plebe, una humilde miembro en dicho equipo.

—¿No puedes liderar porque no tienes suficiente antigüedad?

—Oh, no creo que haya requisitos de antigüedad.

—Entonces, ¿por qué no te postulas para liderarlo?

—Porque… —Cierro la boca y miro mi destornillador. Sí. ¿Por qué? ¿Por qué *no* solicitaría el puesto de líder? ¿Qué está mal conmigo? No es que Sean sea más inteligente que yo. Solo le encanta imponer el sonido de su propia voz a los transeúntes desprevenidos. Y tal vez no tengo suficiente experiencia en liderazgo para saber que seré una buena jefa, pero tengo suficiente experiencia con Sean para saber que *él* no lo será. Sigue llamándome Lara, por el amor de Dios. En *correos electrónicos.* Vamos, que me escribe a mi dirección de correo electrónico, marafloyd@epa.gov. Amigo, ¿puedes literalmente *copiar* y *pegar?*

Miro hacia arriba. Liam me mira con una expresión tranquila, como si esperara pacientemente a que llegara a esta conclusión exacta: soy mejor que Sean. Porque *todos* son mejores que Sean, y eso me incluye a mí.

Siento un escalofrío de algo cálido que me recorre la columna, como si me estuvieran abrazando. Lo cual es raro, ya que nadie me ha abrazado en… Dios, meses. No desde Helena.

—Te diré algo. —Pongo mis manos en mis caderas, repentinamente determinada—. Voy a postularme para el puesto de líder.

—Es exactamente lo que deberías…

—*Solo si* dejas tu trabajo.

Hace una pausa, luego exhala una carcajada.

—Si dejo mi trabajo, ¿quién mantendrá en el costoso estilo de vida de papel higiénico de varias capas al que estás acostumbrada?

—Tú lo harás, ya que probablemente estés sentado sobre montones generacionales de dinero antiguo de Nueva Inglaterra. Además,

podrías seguir siendo abogado de otras corporaciones un poco menos repugnantes. Si es que existe alguna, claro está. Y si hacemos este pacto de sangre y consigo el trabajo, habrá algo aún mejor para ti.

—¿Me dejaras sostener la cabeza de Sean en la taza del inodoro?

—No. Bueno, sí. Pero también, si obtengo la posición de líder de equipo, estaría ganando más dinero. Y finalmente podré mudarme. —*Sin necesidad de vender mi mitad de la casa.*

La expresión de Liam cambia abruptamente.

—Mara…

—¡Piensa en ello! Tú, caminando desnudo en una casa agradablemente helada, rascándote el trasero frente a una nevera llena de salsa tártara, cocinando tacos a las tres de la mañana mientras escuchas pop industrial posmoderno en tu gramófono. Pantallas gigantes a tu alrededor emitiendo partidas de videojuegos las veinticuatro horas del día, los siete días de la semana. Suena bien, ¿eh?

—No —dice rotundamente.

—Eso es porque olvidé mencionar la mejor parte: tu molesta ex compañera de piso se habrá ido, no se verá por ningún lado —expreso—. Ahora, dime que no vas a amar cada segundo de…

—No lo haré, Mara. Yo… —Se da la vuelta, y puedo ver que su mandíbula se aprieta como solía hacerlo antes, cuando mi presencia en esta casa lo molestaba y me consideraba la ruina de todo lo bueno. Pero su mano se aprieta alrededor del borde del mostrador una vez, y parece recuperarse. Me estudia durante un largo momento.

—Por favor —presiono—. No aplicaré si tú no lo haces. ¿De verdad quieres condenarme a una vida atrapada junto a Sean?

Cierra los ojos. Luego los abre y asiente. Una vez.

—No dejaré mi trabajo…

—¡Oh vamos!

—…hasta que tenga otro en mira. Pero empezaré a buscar opciones.

Sonrío lentamente.

—Espera, ¿de verdad? —No *pensé* que esto funcionaría.

—Solo si solicitas el puesto de líder.

—¡Sí! —Doy unas palmadas de emoción—. Liam, te ayudaré. ¿Estás en LinkedIn? Apuesto a que los reclutadores estarían sobre ti.

—¿Qué es LinkedIn?

—Puaj. ¿Tienes al menos una foto reciente?

Me mira sin comprender.

—Bien, te tomaré una foto. En el jardín. Cuando haya buena luz natural. Ponte el traje de tres piezas color carbón y esa camisa azul, te queda genial. —Arquea una ceja, e instantáneamente me arrepiento de haber dicho eso, pero estoy demasiado emocionada con la idea de este extraño pacto de suicidio profesional como para sonrojarme demasiado—. Esto es *increíble.* Tenemos que darnos la mano para cerrar el trato.

Extiendo mi mano, y él la toma de inmediato, la suya es firme, cálida y grande alrededor de la mía, y podría ser la primera vez que nos tocamos a propósito, en lugar del ocasional roce de brazos mientras trabajamos juntos en la cocina o el casual roce de dedos mientras clasifica mi correo. Se siente… agradable. Y correcto. Y natural. Me gusta, y miro la cara de Liam para ver si a él también le gusta, y… hay mil expresiones diferentes pasando por su rostro. Un millón de emociones diferentes.

No puedo comenzar a analizar ni siquiera una.

—Trato hecho —dice, con la voz profunda y un poco ronca.

Utiliza su mano libre para encender el microondas, que, por cierto, está funcionando de nuevo.

Capitulo 8

Hace un mes, dos semanas

La lluvia es mi tipo de clima favorito.

Las tormentas de verano con mis favoritas, con sus fuertes vientos y aire caliente, la forma en que me hacen sentir como si estuviera sentada en el interior húmedo de un globo que está a punto de estallar. Cuando era niña, salía corriendo tan pronto como empezaba a llover solo para mojarme, lo que parecía indignar a mi madre a más no poder.

Pero me conformo con poco. Apenas es febrero, temprano en la noche, y las duras gotas golpeando en el plástico de mi paraguas, simplemente me hacen feliz. Sonrío cuando abro la puerta principal. También voy tarareando. Camino por el pasillo, escuchando la lluvia en lugar de lo que sucede dentro de la casa, y esa debe ser la razón por la que no los escucho.

Liam y una chica. No: una mujer. Están en la cocina. Juntos. Él está recostado contra el mostrador. Ella está sentada sobre este, a su lado, lo suficientemente cerca como para apoyar su mejilla en su hombro mientras le muestra algo en su teléfono que los tiene a ambos sonriendo. Es lo más relajado que he visto a Liam con nadie. Claramente, un momento muy íntimo que no debería *interrumpir*, excepto que no puedo obligarme a moverme. Siento que se me hunde el estómago y me quedo clavada en el suelo, incapaz de retroceder mientras la mujer niega con la cabeza y murmura algo en el oído de Liam que no puedo oír, algo que lo hace reír en voz baja y profunda, y…

Debo jadear. O hacer algún tipo de ruido, porque en un momento se están riendo, con los brazos apretados el uno contra el otro, y al siguiente ambos están mirando hacia arriba. A mí.

Mierda.

Intento con todas mis fuerzas no dejar que mis ojos se fijen en lo acogedor y cómodo que luce, lo familiar y en paz que está. No se parece en nada a lo que ocurre cuando él y yo chocamos accidentalmente en el pasillo, a esa tensión eléctrica que parece crepitar entre nosotros cuando olvidamos que el otro está en la misma habitación y nuestras manos se rozan. Pero de eso se trata, ¿no? Cualquier contacto físico entre Liam y yo es probablemente no deseado por su parte, mientras que esto...

Esto es mortificante. Quiero salir de esta habitación y nunca volver. Comprar una bolsa térmica para el almuerzo y una estufa para acampar, llevármelos a mi habitación y ser completamente autosuficiente.

Sin embargo, la mujer no parece tan inquieta o cohibida por el hecho de que está sentada en un mueble en una casa que no es la suya, con la falda levantada para mostrar unas piernas largas y tonificadas. Ella me sonríe, y de alguna manera, en algún lugar, encuentro mi voz.

—Lo siento. Lo siento mucho, no quise interrumpir… Quería agarrar algo de beber, y yo… —¿Y yo? *Y ahora iré a mi habitación a tirarme por el inodoro. Adiós mundo cruel.*

—Pensé que estarías… —La voz de Liam parece más grave de lo habitual. Me pregunto si estaban a punto de llevarse, lo que sea que estaba sucediendo cuando interrumpí, a su dormitorio. *Oh Dios. Oh Dios, acabo de interrumpir a mi compañero de piso y a su novia. Soy una perdedora—.* Fuera. Pensé que estarías fuera.

Vaya. De acuerdo. Se suponía que yo misma tendría una cita. Con Ted. Algo que acepté hacer el otro día bajo el ímpetu de: «meh, ¿por qué no?» Esta mañana le dije a Liam que llegaría tarde a casa, excepto que terminé cancelando porque… Realmente no tenía ganas de ir.

Por alguna razón.

Que aún no tengo del todo clara.

—No. Quiero decir: Sí. Lo estaba. Pero… —Hago un gesto vago en el aire. Tan buena explicación como se me ocurre.

—Oh.

—Sí. Yo… —Realmente debería ir a mi habitación y desaparecer dentro del inodoro. Pero es difícil, con Liam mirándome así. Mitad curioso, mitad feliz de verme, mitad… algo más. Es la primera vez que lo encuentro con alguien que no es Calvin u otro de sus amigos a los que obviamente conoce desde siempre, alguien que es claramente… Bueno. Está en una cita. Con una mujer. A punto de echar un polvo, probablemente. Y yo interrumpí. *Mierda*—. Yo… Me voy a ir ahora, para que ustedes puedan…

—No es necesario —dice una voz.

¿Una voz? Ah. Sí. Sí. Cierto. Hay una tercera persona en la habitación. Una mujer hermosa con cabello largo y oscuro, que todavía está sentada en el mostrador, mirando con interés cautivador entre Liam y yo, y…

—*Estaba* a punto de irme —dice ella. Pero es mentira. Definitivamente *no estaba a punto* de irse—. ¿Verdad, Liam?— Ella y Liam intercambian una mirada silenciosa y cargada que daría medio riñón por poder descifrar.

—Oh, no. No tienes que irte —digo débilmente—. Yo…

—Por cierto, me voy a presentar, ya que Liam claramente no va a hacerlo. —Salta hacia abajo con una gracia que solo he visto antes en bailarinas de ballet y gimnastas olímpicas, y extiende su mano. Me odio a mí misma por tratar de recordar si es la misma mano que envolvió el brazo de Liam mientras su cabeza estaba sobre su hombro—. Soy Emma. Tú debes ser la famosa Mara.

Por qué ella sabría mi nombre es un absoluto misterio. A menos que Emma y Liam vayan muy en serio, y entonces Liam habría mencionado a su molesta compañera de piso una o dos veces, ¿y qué crees? Parece que simplemente no puedo soportar la idea.

—Sí. Um… Un placer conocerte.

El apretón de manos de Emma es frío y firme. Sonríe brevemente, amable y segura de sí misma, luego se gira para recoger su chaqueta de un taburete.

—Bien. Esto fue divertido. Informativo, también. Mara, espero que nos encontremos *muchas* veces más y tu… —Se vuelve hacia Liam. Su voz baja, pero todavía puedo distinguir las palabras—. Anímate, amigo. No creo que estés tan condenado a una vida de suspiros como crees. Te llamare mañana. —Ella no es muy alta y tiene que pararse de puntillas para besarlo en la mejilla, apoyando una mano en sus abdominales para mantener el equilibrio, y si a Liam le molesta tenerla en su espacio, no lo demuestra. Luego hay un gesto amistoso, dirigido a mí esta vez, un alegre: «Buenas noches». Escucho el sonido de sus tacones contra el piso de parquet en su camino hacia la entrada, y luego…

Se ha ido.

Ese ruido es la puerta principal abriéndose y cerrándose, lo que significa que Liam y yo estamos solos.

—Liam, lo *siento* mucho. No quise…

—¿No quisiste qué? —Se rasca la nuca, luciendo confundido por mi reacción. Todavía está apoyado contra el mostrador, y no puedo obligarme a alejarme de la entrada. No puedo obligarme a continuar y disculparme por interrumpir su cita. *Me iba a ir. Lo prometo. Podrían haber continuado en tu habitación, Liam. No me hubiera importado. De verdad.*

—¿Cómo estuvo la entrevista?

Levanto la vista de inspeccionar mis zapatos.

—¿Qué?

—¿Tu entrevista de hoy? ¿Para el puesto de líder?

—Ah. —Cierto. La entrevista. De la que me he estado quejando durante días. La que practiqué con él ayer. Y el día anterior. La que probablemente se sabe de memoria—. Um, muy bien. Bien. Bueno está bien. Ha sido aceptable.

—Está empeorando con cada palabra que dices.

Me estremezco.

—Fue… Me tropecé un poco.

—Ya veo.

—¿Pero tal vez aun así lo haya hecho mejor que Sean?

—¿Tal vez?

—Probablemente.

Liam sonríe.

—¿Probablemente?

Le devuelvo la sonrisa.

—Casi seguro.

—Qué mejora tan rápida.

Me río, y él se aparta del mostrador y viene a pararse justo en frente de mí. Como si quisiera estar más cerca para esta conversación. Más cerca de mí.

—Sin embargo, podría suponer una mala noticia para ti —digo.

—¿Por qué?

—Si obtengo este puesto, tú también tendrás que dar un paso al frente y encontrar un nuevo trabajo.

—Ah. Sí.

—Hicimos un trato.

—Un trato es un trato.

—Además, después de la entrevista nos dieron información sobre el salario. Es un gran aumento. Definitivamente podré mudarme.

Sus ojos se endurecen, luego cambian de nuevo a una máscara neutral.

—Correcto.

—¿Qué? —Me burlo de él—. ¿Tienes miedo de no poder permitirte comprar tu propia crema para café? —*¿Para qué la usa? Todavía no lo sé.*

—Solo me preocupa que tenga que ver a Eileen tomar decisiones terribles de vida por mi cuenta.

—Eileen sabe lo que está haciendo. Como expliqué en la última entrada de mi blog.

—Que, por supuesto, he leído.

Él no es gracioso. Él no es tan *divertido.* No estoy medio enamorada de su extraño sentido del humor.

—No puedo creer que hayas comentado «borra tu cuenta». Eso es acoso cibernético, Liam.

Todavía está sonriendo, y hay algo cálido desplegándose en mi pecho ahora. Que realmente no debería estar allí, porque… porque no.

—¿Tú y tu amiga están…? —pregunto.

—¿Mi amiga?

—Emma.

—Ah.

Silencio. Me retuerzo las manos, dándome cuenta de que en realidad no he formulado una pregunta. *¿Es ella tu…* No. Demasiado directo. *¿Ustedes dos están saliendo?* ¿Y qué es este salto en mi corazón mientras contemplo la idea? Tal vez Liam nunca ha mencionado una novia. O cualquier otra chica. Pero ¿qué me hizo pensar que…? ¿Qué estaba

viviendo en celibato? No es que sea de mi incumbencia, de todos modos. Solo somos amigos. Buenos amigos. Pero solo amigos.

—¿Qué? —Me da una larga mirada, como si acabara de hacer una pregunta absurda que no se basa en la realidad. La realidad de que acabo de encontrarlos compartiendo demostraciones públicas de afecto.

—Pensé que ustedes dos…

—No. —Niega con la cabeza una vez. Luego la sacude de nuevo—. No, Emma es… Nos conocemos desde el jardín de infantes y ella… No. Somos amigos, buenos amigos, pero nada de eso.

—Oh. —¿Oh? ¿En serio? De ninguna manera. ¿O sí?

—Solo somos amigos —repite de nuevo. Como si quisiera asegurarse de que lo sé. Como si tuviera miedo de que no le crea. Lo cual, para ser justos, no lo hago. Mírala. Míralo—. Ella en realidad… Ella sabe que yo… —Se pasa una mano por la cara, como siempre hace cuando está abrumado o cansado. Es un gesto que estoy viendo más últimamente. Porque Liam me ha dejado ver más de él. No todo es malo, los bordes afilados y los surcos profundos de la personalidad de este hombre. Inesperados, pero no está nada mal.

—¿Ella sabe qué?

—Que no suelo… Nunca… Bueno, *casi* nunca, al parecer… —Liam niega con la cabeza, como si dijera. *No importa*, y sigo sin saber qué es lo que casi nunca hace, porque no continúa y no estoy segura de querer investigar. Además, me está mirando de una manera que no puedo entender, y de repente siento que es hora de salir corriendo.

—Me voy a dormir, ¿de acuerdo? —Sonrío—. Tengo que madrugar, mañana.

Él asiente.

—Claro. Por supuesto. —Pero cuando estoy casi fuera de la habitación, me llama—. ¿Mara?

Hago una pausa. *No te des la vuelta*.

—¿Sí?

—Yo… Qué tengas buenas noches.

No suena como lo que originalmente quiso decir. Pero respondo:

—Tú también —y vuelvo corriendo a mi habitación.

Capitulo 9

Hace un mes

—Me divertí mucho esta noche.

—Bueno. Gracias. Quiero decir… —Me aclaro la garganta—. Yo también.

Ted no es más que predecible. Me llevó al restaurante etíope que le dije que tenía ganas de probar (excelente); planteó temas de conversación sobre los que sé lo suficiente como para sentirme cómoda, pero no tan familiares como para aburrirme durante los primeros cinco minutos; y ahora, ahora que me acompañó a mi puerta, se inclinará y me besará, tal como podría haber anticipado cuando me recogió hace exactamente tres horas.

Previsiblemente, será un buen beso. Un beso sólido. Probablemente podría conducir a un buen sexo si decidiera invitarlo a tomar una copa. Sexo sólido. He pasado mucho tiempo sin tener sexo. Estamos hablando de años, aquí. Helena abriría el champán y me recordaría que desempolve las telarañas.

Y aun así.

No tengo intención de pedirle que entre. Realmente han pasado años, pero esto con Ted no se siente… correcto.

Es un buen tipo, pero no va a funcionar, por una gran cantidad de razones. Eso, me digo a mí misma, no tiene nada que ver con el tiempo que Liam me miró hoy, antes de que Ted se detuviera en nuestra entrada. O con la forma en que instantáneamente desvió la mirada cuando lo atrapé. O con la tonalidad ronca de su voz cuando se fijó en mi vestido y dijo:

—Yo… Estás preciosa.

Sonaba como si quisiera decir algo más. Un poco melancólico. Casi disculpándose. Me hizo arrepentirme de pasar treinta minutos maquillándome para salir con otra persona, un pobre chico al que ni siquiera quiero impresionar por la sencilla razón de que no es…

Sí.

—Yo… —Respiro hondo y doy un paso atrás de Ted, cuyo único defecto es… no ser otro chico. No puedo imaginarlo viendo *The Bachelor* conmigo, lo que aparentemente es un factor decisivo. Quién lo iba a decir, ¿eh?—. Voy a entrar ahora. Pero gracias por todo. Tuve una velada encantadora.

Si Ted está decepcionado, no puedo decirlo. Para su crédito, duda solo brevemente. Luego sonríe y se retira a su auto sin ningún *te llamo luego* o un *hasta la próxima* que ambos sabemos que no serían más que mentiras de cortesía. Agradezco en silencio a los dioses de la EPA por transferirlo a otro equipo la semana pasada y entro.

Me sorprende encontrar a Liam en la sala de estar, sentado en el sofá con una cerveza en una mano, una pila de papeles en la otra, y sus anteojos para leer ridículamente lindos posados en su nariz. O tal vez no lo estoy. Es sábado por la noche, después de todo. Solemos pasar las noches de los sábados en ese mismo sofá, viendo la tele, hablando de todo y de nada. Tiene sentido que él esté aquí, aunque yo no estuviera.

Por mi vida, no puedo recordar una mejor actividad que quedarme en casa en pijama y pasar el rato con mi compañero de piso.

—¿Qué estás leyendo?

Se fija en mi vestido corto pero no demasiado corto, mi cabello suelto, mis labios rojos, e inmediatamente vuelve a mirar sus papeles.

—Solo un documento de orientación para el trabajo.

—¿Cómo lograr su propio derrame de petróleo en diez sencillos pasos?

Sus labios se curvan hacia arriba.

—Creo que solo se necesitaría uno.

—Escucha, ya hemos hablado de esto. Está bien si no quieres renunciar todavía, pero lo mínimo que puedes hacer es *no* trabajar los fines de semana. Vamos, Liam. Hazlo por el medio ambiente.

Suspira, pero se quita las gafas y guarda los papeles. Sonrío y me acerco para agarrar su cerveza y tomar un sorbo sin molestarme en preguntar. Liam me estudia en silencio, pero no comienza a leer de nuevo. Cuando levanto una ceja, *¿qué?* cede y pregunta:

—¿No va a entrar?

—¿Quién?

Liam mira hacia la entrada.

—Ah. —Cierto. También existen otros hombres. Difícil de recordar, a veces—. No. Ted no… Se fue a casa.

—Vaya.

—Yo no… No somos… —¿Cómo decirlo?—. No hemos…

Liam asiente, aunque es posible que no haya entendido lo que acabo de murmurar. Y luego no dice nada. Y entonces las cosas parecen ponerse un poco raras. Hay una extraña tensión en la habitación. Como si los dos estuviéramos ocultando algo. Prefiero no buscar dentro de mí misma para averiguar qué.

—Debería irme a la cama.

—Está bien. —Él traga—. Buenas noches.

Puede ser que las dos copas que tomé en la cita fueran demasiado, o tal vez nunca me acostumbré a los tacones altos. El hecho es que pierdo el equilibrio y tropiezo justo cuando trato de pasar junto a él. Sus manos, grandes, sólidas y cálidas incluso a través de mi vestido, se cierran alrededor de mis caderas hasta que estoy estable de nuevo. Estoy de pie, y él está sentado, y así soy varios centímetros más alta que él, y… Es nuevo verlo desde esta perspectiva. Se ve más joven, casi

más suave, y mi primer instinto de borracha es ahuecar su cara, trazar la línea de su nariz, pasar mi pulgar por su labio inferior.

Me detengo antes de hacerlo, pero mi lento y fallido cerebro no lo hace. Me alimenta con una imagen extraña: Liam sonriendo y sentándome a horcajadas en su regazo. Empujando entre mis rodillas. Sus manos rozando mis muslos, colándose debajo de mi vestido, haciéndome cosquillas en la piel, haciéndome reír. Alcanza mi espalda baja y su agarre se intensifica, sus largos dedos deslizándose bajo el elástico de mis bragas, ahuecando mi trasero para presionarme contra su… *Ah.* Está duro. Grande. Insistente. Me coloca exactamente como me quiere y exhalo justo cuando gime en mi oído:

—Cuidado, Mara.

Espera. ¿Qué?

Parpadeo fuera de lo que sea *que* haya sido eso, justo cuando Liam me suelta. Y dice:

—Cuidado, Mara. —Y doy un paso atrás antes de que pueda humillarme con algo estúpido y completamente vergonzoso.

—Gracias. —Nuestras miradas se sostienen durante lo que parece demasiado tiempo. Me aclaro la garganta—. ¿También te vas a la cama?

—Todavía no.

—No tienes permitido leer más cosas sobre derrames de petróleo, Liam.

—Entonces tal vez juegue un poco.

—¿Sin Calvin? —Ladeo la cabeza—. ¿No dijiste que Calvin vendría?

—Se suponía que debía hacerlo.

—¿Sabes qué? —paso una mano por mi cabello. Es una decisión de una fracción de segundo—. En realidad no tengo tanto sueño tampoco. ¿Quieres que juegue contigo?

Él ríe.

—¿En serio?

—Sí. ¿Qué? —Me quito los zapatos, agarro una manta, con la que me cubrió la primera noche, la que ha estado en esta habitación desde entonces, y me dejo caer en el sofá, justo a su lado. Un poco demasiado cerca, tal vez, pero Liam no se queja—. Tengo un doctorado. Puedo pretender matar a los malos usando una… ¿palanca de mando?

—Controlador. —Sacude la cabeza, pero parece… feliz, creo—. ¿Alguna vez has jugado un videojuego?

—No. Siendo completamente sincera, se ven horribles y no estoy segura de por qué una persona, obviamente inteligente, con un montón de títulos de la Ivy League que cuestan más que mis órganos internos, podría estar tan metido en esta mierda de bam, bam, pero tengo un blog sobre *The Bachelor,* así que no tengo moral para recriminarte nada. —Me encojo de hombros—. Entonces, ¿qué le pasó a Calvin?

—No pudo venir.

—¿Jugando con alguien más?

—Tenía una cita.

Tarareo.

—Tal vez deberías haberte unido a él. ¿Emma estaba ocupada?

Me lanza una mirada que no puedo descifrar del todo. Como si hubiera algo catastróficamente mal en lo que dije.

—Te lo dije, Emma no quiere salir conmigo más de lo que yo quiero salir con ella.

Lo dudo. ¿Quién no querría? Además, ¿qué tan asustado estarías si te dijera que la otra noche soñé contigo y Emma, sentados uno al lado del otro en la cocina? Estaba triste por ello. Pero solo durante un rato. Porque después de un tiempo ya no eran tú y Emma. Éramos tú y yo y estabas parado entre mis

piernas y pusiste tus manos en la parte interna de mis muslos y los abriste más, para hacerte espacio y…

—Entonces podrías salir con alguien más —le espeto. Para poner fin a lo que estaba sucediendo en mi cabeza.

—No creo que quiera hacerlo, Mara.

—Bien. —Mi corazón da un salto—. No disfrutarías de una buena comida, una conversación agradable y echar un polvo.

—¿Así fue tu cita? —pregunta en voz baja, sin mirarme a los ojos.

—Solo quise decir… —estoy nerviosa—, puede que disfrutes salir con la persona adecuada.

—Deja de intentar canalizar a Helena.

Me río.

—Tengo que mantener la tradición familiar de entrometerme en la vida personal de las personas. —Se me ocurre algo y jadeo—. ¿Sabes lo que es *realmente* impactante?

—¿Qué?

—Que Helena nunca intentó emparejarnos. Como tú y yo. Juntos.

—Sí, eso es… —Liam se queda en silencio abruptamente, como si a él también se le hubiera ocurrido algo. Se queda mirando algún punto en la distancia por un momento y luego deja escapar una risa baja y profunda—. Helena.

—¿Qué? —Él no me responde. Así que repito—, ¿Liam? ¿Qué?

—Me acabo de dar cuenta de algo… —Sacude la cabeza, divertido—. Nada, Mara.— Quiero insistir hasta que me explique a qué revelación parece haber llegado, pero me pone un mando en la mano y me dice—: Juguemos.

—Okey. ¿A quién se supone que debo matar y cómo lo hago?

Él me sonríe, y un millón de chispas chisporrotean por mi columna.

—Pensé que nunca lo preguntarías.

Capitulo 10

Hace tres semanas

Cuando Liam llega a casa, apenas puedo sentir los dedos de mis pies, me castañetean los dientes y soy más una manta que un ser humano. Me estudia desde la entrada de la sala de estar mientras se quita la corbata, con los labios apretados en diversión.

Imbécil

Me observa durante un largo momento antes de acercarse. Luego se agacha frente a mí, amplía el espacio entre las capas de mantas para ver mejor mis ojos y dice:

—Tengo miedo de preguntar.

—E-es-la calefacción no funciona. Ya lo investigué, creo que se ha fundido un fusible. Llamé al tipo que lo arregló la última vez, d-debería estar aquí en media hora.

Liam ladea la cabeza.

—Estás debajo de al menos tres Snuggies. ¿Por qué tienes los labios azules?

—¡Hace mucho frío! No puedo entrar en calor.

—No hace tanto frío.

—Tal vez no hace tanto frío cuando tienes seiscientas libras de músculos para aislarte, pero me voy a morir.

—¿En serio?

—De hipotermia.

Definitivamente está presionando sus labios para evitar sonreír.

—¿Te gustaría tomar prestado mi abrigo de piel de bebé foca?

Dudo.

—¿Realmente tienes uno?

—¿Lo querrías, si lo tuviera?

—Tengo miedo de averiguarlo.

Sacude la cabeza y se sienta a mi lado en el sofá.

—Ven aquí.

—¿Qué?

—Ven aquí.

—No. ¿Por qué? ¿Estás planeando robar mi asiento? Apártate. Me tomó mucho tiempo calentarlo…

No llego a terminar la oración. Porque me levanta, Snuggies y todo, y me lleva sobre su regazo hasta que mi trasero descansa sobre sus muslos. Lo cual…

Vaya.

Esto es nuevo.

Por un momento, mi columna se pone rígida y mis músculos se tensan por la sorpresa. Pero es muy breve, porque él es tan deliciosamente *cálido.* Mucho más acogedor que mi estúpido lugar en el sofá y su piel… huele familiar y bien. Muy, muy bien.

—Eres tan cálido. —Dejo que mi frente caiga contra su mejilla—. Es como si generaras calor.

—Creo que todos los humanos lo hacen. —Su nariz toca la punta helada de mi oreja—. Es física, o algo así.

—Primera ley de la t-termodinámica. La energía no se crea ni se destruye—. Su mano sube por mi columna hasta mi nuca, y de repente

la temperatura sube cinco o diez grados. El calor lame mi columna y se extiende alrededor de mi torso. Mis pechos. Mi barriga. Casi lloro.

—Excepto por ti, aparentemente —dice.

—Es tan injusto.— El pulgar de Liam está trazando patrones en la piel de mi garganta, y no tengo más remedio que suspirar. Ya me siento mejor. Estoy *brillando…*

—¿Qué seas a donde el calor va a morir?

—Sí. —Me entierro más cerca de su pecho—. Tal vez mis padres son en secreto cambiaformas de tiburones. De la variedad poiquilotérmica de sangre fría. Se olvidaron de advertirme que heredé cero habilidades de termorregulación y que nunca debería vivir en tierra firme.

—Es la única explicación posible. —Su aliento choca contra mis sienes, y me envuelve una agradable y ligera picazón.

—¿Por mi incapacidad patológica para mantener la homeostasis térmica?

—Por lo poco que te aprecian. —De repente me está abrazando un poco más fuerte. Un poco más cerca—. Además de por lo poco cocido que te gusta el bistec.

—Yo… Me gusta medio cocido. —Mi voz tiembla. Me digo que es por el frío y no porque se acuerde de las cosas que le conté de mi familia.

—Por favor. Básicamente lo comes crudo.

—Humph. —No tiene sentido discutir con él, no cuando tiene razón. No cuando su mano sube y baja por mi brazo; un gesto cálido y tranquilizador, incluso a través de las mantas—. ¿Crees que podrá arreglar el fusible esta noche?

—Eso espero. Si no, iré corriendo a la tienda y te compraré un calentador.

—¿Harías eso?

Se encoge de hombros. Hay alrededor de diez capas entre nosotros (Liam subestimó enormemente los Snuggies que puedo usar a la vez) pero se siente tan cálido y sólido. Hace unos meses, lo creía frío, en todos los sentidos posibles. Cuando solía creer que lo odiaba.

—Se siente menos trabajo que llevarte a la sala de emergencias para que recibas un tratamiento por congelación. —Su mejilla se curva contra mi frente.

—No eres tan cruel cómo crees, Liam.

—No soy tan cruel cómo *crees*.

Me río y me recuesto para mirarlo, porque se siente como si estuviera sonriendo, con una amplia sonrisa, y ese es un fenómeno raro y maravilloso que quiero saborear. Aunque no lo está. Él también me está mirando, estudiándome de esa forma grave y seria en que a veces lo hace. Primero mis ojos, luego mis labios, y ¿qué es esto, este momento de pesado y completo silencio que hace que mi corazón se acelere y mi piel hormiguee?

—Mara. —Su garganta se mueve mientras traga—. Yo…

Unos golpes fuertes nos sobresaltan.

—El electricista.

—Oh. Sí. —Mi voz es a la vez estridente y sin aliento.

—Yo abriré la puerta, ¿de acuerdo?

Por favor, no. Quédate.

—Okey.

—¿Crees que podrás evitar entrar en hipotermia si te suelto?

—Sí. Probablemente. —*No…*— ¿Tal vez?

Pone los ojos en blanco de esa manera que me recuerda tanto a Helena. Pero su sonrisa, esa que buscaba antes, aquí está. Por fin.

—Muy bien entonces. —Sin soltarme, se pone de pie y me lleva hasta la entrada.

Escondo mi cara en su cuello, zumbando de calidez y algo más, desconocido e inidentificable.

Capitulo 11

Hace dos semanas

Recibo la llamada telefónica un miércoles por la noche, antes de la cena, pero después de haber regresado del trabajo.

Estoy notablemente serena en todo momento: Hago preguntas pertinentes e importantes; incluso me acuerdo de agradecer a la persona que llamó por compartir la noticia conmigo. Pero después de que ambos colgamos, pierdo la cabeza por completo.

No llamo a Sadie. No le envío mensajes de texto a Hannah con la esperanza de que tenga recepción en el vientre de cualquier cachalote nórdico que sea su residencia actual. Corro escaleras arriba, casi tropezando con las alfombras y muebles que han pertenecido a la familia Harding durante cinco generaciones, y una vez que estoy frente a la oficina de Liam, abro la puerta sin llamar.

Lo cual, en retrospectiva, no es mi momento más educado. Y tampoco lo es el siguiente, cuando corro hacia Liam (que está hablando por teléfono junto a la ventana), tiro mis brazos alrededor de su cintura sin tener en cuenta lo que sea que esté haciendo, y grito:

—¡Lo tengo! Liam, ¡conseguí el trabajo!

Él no se inmuta.

—¿La posición de líder del equipo?

—Sí.

Su sonrisa es cegadora. Luego le dice:

—Te volveré a llamar —a quien quiera que esté al otro lado de la línea, e ignora por completo el hecho de que su respuesta es «Señor, este es un asunto urgente…» y arroja el teléfono en la silla más cercana.

Luego me devuelve el abrazo. Me levanta como si estuviera demasiado feliz para que yo considerara siquiera detenerlo, como si esta llamada telefónica que acabo de recibir cambiara mi vida y también la suya, como si hubiera estado deseando esto tanto y tan intensamente como yo. Y cuando me da vueltas por la habitación, un único y perfecto torbellino de pura felicidad, ahí es cuando me doy cuenta.

De lo increíble y completamente perdida que estoy por este hombre.

Ha estado allí durante semanas. Meses. Susurrándome al oído, arrastrándose hacia mí, golpeándome en la cara como un tren sobre una vía de hierro. Se ha vuelto demasiado formidable y luminoso para que lo ignore, pero está bien.

No quiero ignorarlo.

Liam me pone sobre mis pies. Sus manos se demoran en mí antes de dar un paso atrás, una mano arrastrándose por mi brazo, la otra empujando un mechón de cabello más allá de mi sien, detrás de mi oreja. Cuando me suelta, quiero seguirlo. Quiero rogarle que no lo haga.

—Mara, eres fantástica. Brillante.

Me siento fantástica. Me siento brillante, cuando estoy contigo. Y quiero que tú sientas lo mismo.

—Claramente merezco elegir qué ver en la televisión esta noche.

—Tú eliges qué ver en la televisión todas las noches.

—Pero esta noche en realidad me lo *merezco*.

Se ríe, sacudiendo la cabeza, sosteniendo mi mirada. El tiempo se estira. La tensión pesada y dulce se espesa entre nosotros. Quiero besarlo. Quiero besarlo tanto, tanto. ¿Debería preguntarle? ¿Me alejaría? ¿O me empujaría hacia atrás, me presionaría contra su escritorio, me daría la vuelta y me sujetaría con una mano abierta entre

mis omóplatos y me susurraría *Finalmente*, y *Quédate quieta*, y *Celebremos*, y…

No. Detente.

Jadeo.

—Oh, Dios mío, ¿qué crees que está haciendo Sean en este momento?

—Llorar en el baño, espero.

—Ojalá esté tuiteando su desesperación y escuchando una lista de reproducción de My Chemical Romance en Spotify. Debo *ir* a acecharlo en las redes sociales. Vuelvo enseguida. —Trato de salir de la oficina de Liam tan rápido como entré corriendo. Sin embargo, él me detiene con una mano en mi muñeca.

—¿Mara?

—¿Sí?

Me doy la vuelta. Su rostro feliz e inusualmente abierto se ha transformado en otra cosa. Algo más tenue. Opaco.

—Dijiste que… Hace unas semanas, dijiste que si conseguías el trabajo, te mudarías.

Oh.

Oh.

El recuerdo apuñala como un cuchillo entre mis costillas. Yo *dije* eso. Lo hice. Pero han sido semanas. Semanas de robar comida del plato del otro y enviar mensajes de texto a la mitad del día para discutir sobre la vida amorosa de Eileen y esa vez que me hizo reír tanto que no pude respirar durante diez minutos.

Las cosas… ¿No han cambiado las cosas con nosotros? ¿Entre nosotros?

Por un momento, no puedo hablar. No sé qué decir ante el hecho de que su primer pensamiento fue que me mudaría… No, eso es poco caritativo. Él estaba feliz por mí. Genuinamente feliz. Su *segundo* pensamiento fue que finalmente volvería a vivir solo.

Trato de hacer una broma.

—¿Por qué? ¿Tan pronto me estás echando?

—No. No, Mara, eso no es lo que yo…

Su teléfono suena, interrumpiéndolo. Liam le da una mirada de frustración, pero cuando sus ojos están sobre mí otra vez me he recuperado.

Si Liam quiere vivir solo, está bien. Le caigo bien. Se preocupa por mí. Es un gran tipo, sé todo eso. Pero ser amigo de alguien no equivale a querer pasar cada momento de tu vida con esa persona y… sí.

Supongo que ese es mi propio problema a resolver. Algo en lo que trabajar una vez que me mude y esta parte de mi vida termine.

—Por supuesto que voy a buscar un nuevo lugar. —Trato de sonar alegre. Con resultados bastante poco satisfactorios—. No puedo esperar para caminar desnuda y atiborrarme de crema para celebrar las excelentes elecciones de vida de Eileen y… —No puedo obligarme a continuar, y mi voz se apaga.

Los ojos de Liam permanecen retraídos. Ausentes, casi. Pero después de un rato dice:

—Lo que quieras, Mara —en un tono amable y gentil.

Logro una última sonrisa y salgo de su oficina cuando la primera lágrima golpea mi clavícula.

Capitulo 12

Hace una semana

No existe un plano dimensional en el que la búsqueda de un apartamento (más precisamente: la búsqueda de un apartamento mientras se tiene el corazón roto) pueda ser placentera. Debo admitir, sin embargo, que mirar Craigslist en el teléfono con mis amigas mientras tomo un sorbo del vino tinto caro que Liam obtuvo de un retiro de FGP Corp alivia el dolor de la terrible experiencia.

Sadie acaba de pasarse una hora contando con todo lujo de detalles que hace poco tuvo una cita con un ingeniero que luego resultó ser un completo imbécil, un problema, dado que a ella le gustaba el tipo (le gustaba mucho, mucho). Aunque ella está siendo inusualmente esquiva al respecto, estoy 97 por ciento segura de que hubo sexo, 98 por ciento segura de que el sexo fue excelente y 99 por ciento segura de que el sexo fue el mejor de su vida. Lo que parece estar alimentando sus planes de añadir veneno de sapo al café del tipo, lo cual, si conoces a Sadie, está bastante a la altura.

Hannah está de regreso en Houston, lo cual es bueno para su conexión a Internet, pero malo para su tranquilidad. Se ha estado peleando con un tipo importante de la NASA que ha estado vetando su proyecto de investigación de mascotas sin motivo alguno. A estas alturas Hannah está, por supuesto, lista para cometer asesinato. No puedo ver sus manos a través de FaceTime, pero estoy casi segura de que está afilando un cuchillo.

Hay algo tranquilizador en escuchar acerca de sus vidas. Me recuerda a la escuela de posgrado, cuando no podíamos pagar la terapia y nos involucrábamos en algunas quejas comunitarias saludables cada dos noches, solo para sobrevivir a la locura. Hubo

algunos malos momentos… Corrección, era la escuela de posgrado: hubo *un montón de* malos momentos, pero al final, estábamos juntas. Al final, todo resultó estar bien.

Así que tal vez eso es lo que sucederá esta vez también. Estoy a punto de quedarme sin hogar, mi corazón se siente como una piedra, y quiero estar con alguien mucho más de lo que ese alguien quiere estar conmigo. Pero Sadie y Hannah están (más o menos) aquí y, por lo tanto, las cosas saldrán (más o menos) bien.

—Los hombres fueron un error —dice Sadie.

—Un gran error —agrega Hannah.

—*Enorme.* —Me hundo más profundamente en el sofá de la sala, preguntándome si Liam, mi error personal, vendrá a casa esta noche. Ya son más de las nueve. Quizás salió a cenar. Tal vez, si tiene algo que celebrar, dormirá en otro lado. Con Emma, quizá.

—A veces son útiles. —Señala Sadie—. Como ese tipo con una camiseta de Korn que me ayudó a abrir un frasco de rábanos en escabeche en 2018.

—Oh sí. —Asiento con la cabeza—. Recuerdo eso.

—Sin lugar a dudas, mi experiencia más profunda con un hombre.

—En retrospectiva, deberías haberle pedido que se casara contigo.

—Una oportunidad perdida.

—¿Podría ser que hemos tenido una mala suerte excepcional? —Hay algo de ruido en el lado de la línea de Hannah. Quizá realmente *esté* afilando un cuchillo—. ¿Podría ser que las mareas cambien y finalmente conozcamos a tipos que no merecen ser alimentados con un plato de chinchetas?

—Podría ser —digo. *Sé positiva,* me decía Helena. *La negatividad es para viejos como yo—.* Realmente, todo podría ser. Podría ser que

seamos seleccionadas al azar para un suministro de por vida de Nutella.

Sadie resopla.

—Podría ser que el poema surrealista que escribí en tercer grado me haga ganar el Premio Nobel de literatura.

—Que mi cactus realmente florezca este año.

—Que comenzarán a producir helados Twizzlers.

—Que *Firefly* tendrá la última temporada que se merece.

Nadie habla durante unos segundos. Hasta que Hannah dice:

—Mara, rompiste el flujo. Inventa algo encantador y, sin embargo, inalcanzable.

—Correcto. Uhm, podría ser que cuando Liam vuelva a casa me pida que no me mude, me incline sobre el mueble más cercano y me folle duro y rápido. —Cuando termino la oración, Sadie se ríe y Hannah silba.

—Duro y rápido, ¿eh?

—Sí. —Niego con la cabeza—. Absolutamente absurdo, sin embargo.

—No. Bueno, no más que lo de mi poema —concede Sadie—. Entonces, ¿cómo va el enamoramiento no correspondido?

—No es *realmente* un enamoramiento. —Sin embargo, no va muy desencaminada con la parte del: no correspondido.

—Pensé que habíamos acordado que fantasear con estar inclinado sobre el fregadero de la cocina, de hecho, constituye un enamoramiento.

Resoplo.

—Bien. Es… bueno. Es apenas un enamoramiento, en serio. Porque realmente no sueño despierta con tener sexo con él tan a menudo. —Mentirosa. Qué mentirosa—. Se podría decir que aún se encuentra en

la etapa larvaria. —Está llegando a la adolescencia y es fuerte como un toro—. Creo que un poco de distancia será buena. Tengo una pista sobre un apartamento barato en el centro. —Extrañaré este lugar. Extrañaré sentirme cerca de Helena. Extrañaré la forma en que Liam se burla de mí por no poder aprenderme los botones del estúpido control de la PlayStation. Muchisísimo.

—¿Y estás segura de que a Liam le parece bien que te vayas?

—Es lo que él quiere. —Las cosas han estado un poco raras desde la semana pasada. Incómodas. Como si hubiésemos dado paso atrás en nuestra amistad, pero… Estaré bien. Estará bien—. Creo que desaparecerá. El enamoramiento.

—Correcto —Coincide Sadie, sin parecer mucho como si estuviera de acuerdo.

—Muy pronto —agrego.

—Estoy segura.

—Solo necesito que… Nunca se entere de mis fantasías, las que lo involucran a él y los muebles de esta casa —explico.

—Mmm.

—Porque haría las cosas raras para nosotros —explico—. Para él.

—Sí.

—Y no se lo merece.

—No.

—Es un buen amigo. Además, está en medio de muchos cambios en su vida. Quiero apoyarlo. Y me gusta pasar el rato con él.

—Sí.

—Básicamente, no quiero que se sienta incómodo conmigo.

—No.

—De todas formas. —Mis mejillas se sienten cálidas. Debe ser todo el vino—. Deberíamos hablar de otra cosa.

—Okey.

—Literalmente cualquier otra cosa.

—Bien.

—Una de ustedes debería proponer un tema.

Si estuvieran aquí en persona, Sadie y Hannah intercambiarían una mirada larga y cargada. Tal como están las cosas, se quedan en silencio por unos momentos. Entonces Hannah dice:

—¿Puedo contarte una historia?

—Por supuesto.

—Se trata de una amiga mía.

Arrugo la frente.

—¿Qué amiga?

—¡Ah… Sarah!

—¿Sarah?

—Sarah.

—No creo que la conozca. ¿Desde cuándo tienes amigas que no conozco?

—No es importante. Entonces, hace un par de años, mi amiga Sarah se mudó con este tipo, um… Will. E inicialmente realmente se odiaban, pero luego se dieron cuenta de que eran más similares de lo que pensaban, y ella comenzó a hablar de él cada vez más, en términos cada vez más positivos. Así que Sadie y yo, Sadie la conoce también, bueno, pensamos, Dios, *¿se está enamorando de este tipo?* Y luego, una noche, mi amiga me confesó que tenía fantasías muy sucias, que sonaban muy elaboradas, en las que Will la inclinaba sobre la mesa de la cocina y…

—Adiós, Hannah.

—Espera —dice Sadie—, ¡no hemos escuchado el final!

—Ustedes son amigas de mierda y no estoy segura de por qué las amo tanto. —Les cuelgo, riéndome a mi pesar. Tiro mi teléfono y me levanto para volver a llenar mi copa de vino, pensando que cuando Hannah y Sadie se enamoren de alguien, las molestaré sin piedad e inventaré historias falsas sobre personas falsas, y entonces sabrán cómo se siente, ser…

—Mara.

Liam está de pie en la entrada de la sala de estar, con la corbata en la mano, luciendo cansado, guapo, alto y…

Oh, mierda.

—¿Liam?

—Hola.

—¿C-cuándo llegaste aquí?

—Justo ahora.

—Vaya. —*Gracias a la mierda*—. ¿Cómo estuvo tu…? La entrevista, ¿cómo te fue?

—Bien, creo.

—Vaya. Bueno.

Acaba de llegar, dijo. Es posible que no me haya oído. No he dicho nada comprometedor en los últimos segundos. Y el cuento de hadas de imitación de Hannah usaba diferentes nombres.

¿Por qué me mira así, entonces?

—¿Cuándo sabrás si obtuviste el trabajo?

Se encoge de hombros.

—En unos días, supongo. —Se cortó el pelo la semana pasada. No demasiado corto, pero más corto de lo que nunca lo ha tenido. A veces, a menudo, lo veo bajo cierta luz, o lo atrapo haciendo una de esas caras que estoy segura que no deja que nadie más vea, y mi respiración se entrecorta por el asombro.

—¿Tienes hambre? Hice un salteado. Hay sobras.

Me estudia y no dice nada.

—No tiene zanahorias. Lo prometo. —¿Qué haré con todo este conocimiento que tengo de las cosas que le gustan y las que no? ¿Este conocimiento de *él?* ¿Adónde irá una vez que ya no esté en mi vida?

—No tengo hambre, pero gracias.

—Okey. —Camino alrededor del sofá, buscando algo que hacer conmigo misma, me apoyo en el marco de la puerta. A solo unos metros de él—. Creo que he encontrado un lugar. Para mudarme, quiero decir.

—¿Lo has hecho? —su expresión es ilegible.

—Sí. Pero no lo sabré hasta dentro de unos días.

Silencio. Y una mirada larga y pensativa.

—Todavía no venderé mi mitad. Lo siento, sé que quieres comprar mi parte, pero…

—No quiero.

Arrugo la frente.

—¿Qué quieres decir con que no quieres?

—No quiero.

Me río.

—Liam, has estado ofreciendo comprar mi parte durante un millón de años.

Su boca se curva.

—Hace un millón de años la casa no existía y este lugar era un pantano, pero no es como si fueras un científico ambiental y pudieras saberlo…

—Oh, cállate. Todo lo que digo es, durante mucho tiempo has… —Aunque, ahora que lo pienso, su abogado no me ha enviado un correo electrónico en… semanas. ¿Meses, tal vez?—. Ay dios mío. Liam, ¿estás en la quiebra? —Me inclino hacia adelante—. ¿Es el mercado de valores? ¿Te has jugado todo tu dinero? ¿Has apostado la totalidad de tus ahorros a que el equipo masculino de fútbol de EE. UU. ganará la Copa del Mundo y tardíamente te diste cuenta de que ni siquiera clasificó? ¿Te has involucrado en un esquema piramidal de LuLaRoe y no puedes dejar de comprar leggins nuevos…?

—¿Estas borracha?

—No. Bueno, tomé un poco de tu vino. Un montón. ¿Por qué?

—Te vuelves molesta cuando estás borracha. —Hay un atisbo de una sonrisa en sus ojos—. Pero linda.

Saco la lengua.

—Eres molesto todo el tiempo. —*Y lindo, también.*

La sonrisa de Liam se ensancha un poco y se mira los pies. Luego:

—Buenas noches, Mara. —Se da la vuelta y se dirige a su habitación. La luz amarilla de la lámpara proyecta un cálido resplandor dorado sobre la anchura de sus hombros.

—Por cierto —lo llamo—, compré una nueva crema. Es de canela ¡La odiarás!

Liam no responde y no se detiene al salir. No lo veo hasta la noche siguiente, y ahí es…

Ahí es cuando sucede.

Capitulo 13

Presente

La parte más rara es lo rápido que todo cambia.

Un minuto, estoy en medio de la limpieza de la cocina, preguntándome si la licuadora de batidos sobreviviría en un viaje por el lavavajillas, pensando en mi añoranza continua y mi próxima mudanza, en cuánto extrañaré esto: volver a casa después del trabajo, encontrar doce tenedores y un colador en el fregadero, preguntándome cuántos de ellos son de Liam.

Al siguiente, él está de pie detrás de mí. Liam Harding está justo detrás de mí, a *propósito,* y me presiona contra el mostrador. Como si *quisiera* estar aquí, cerca, tocándome, tanto como yo quiero que esté. Estoy demasiado aturdida para hacer algo con el agua que corre por el fregadero, pero él se inclina para cerrarla y, de repente, la habitación queda en silencio.

Su mano se cierra alrededor de mi cadera, y no puedo pensar. No puedo comprender lo que está pasando. Estoy respirando. Está respirando. Estamos respirando juntos, el mismo ritmo, el mismo aire, y por un momento sólo lo siento. Esto. Es agradable. Es bueno. Es lo que he estado esperando.

Luego mueve mi cabello detrás de mi hombro; destapa la base de mi garganta. Siento algo, ¿dientes, tal vez?, rozando mi piel.

—¿Liam? —Medio gimo.

—Soy yo. —Me está besando. Justo en ese punto—. ¿Esto se siente bien?

Estoy asintiendo, *sí,* ¿a qué?, no lo sé. *Sí, eres Liam. Sí, esto se siente bien. Sí, estoy a punto de derretirme en el suelo.*

—Hueles tan bien, Mara.

Gracias a Dios por el fregadero de la cocina por agarrarme, porque mis rodillas están a punto de ceder. Gracias a Dios por las manos de Liam también. Excepto que una de ellas se desliza debajo de mi camisa. Nunca me había considerado delicada, pero de alguna manera se las arregla para cubrir todo mi torso y su pulgar…

Está rozando la parte inferior de mi pecho y…

Oh…

Él lame el pulso en la parte baja de mi garganta, y me mortifica escucharme gemir.

—Eres tan suave. —Su aliento es caliente en mi oído, y me estremezco. Exactamente una vez—. Creo que imaginé que no lo serías. Siempre estás corriendo, haciendo ejercicio. Siempre te ves tan fuerte, pero…

Me suelta por una fracción de segundo, y cada célula de mi cuerpo se rebela a la vez.

No.

Espera.

Quédate.

Pero él sólo me está ajustando. Su mano presiona mi espalda baja, inclinándome así: ligeramente hacia adelante, como… Dios, como si estuviera a punto de…

Él está de vuelta en mí inmediatamente. Comienza a desabrochar la cremallera de mis vaqueros, el sonido de ellos se siente como el ruido de un tambor en el silencio. El aire sale de mis pulmones en una fuerte exhalación.

—¿Está esto bien? —pregunta, suave, ensordecedor, y sí, *está* más que bien. Incluso si mis vaqueros se deslizan por mis muslos, y nunca, nunca me he sentido menos en control. Creo que estamos a punto de

tener sexo, pero el sexo *no es* así. El sexo es quitarse la ropa torpemente, negociar posiciones y horas de juegos previos salpicados de *¿Estás seguro de que no deberías estar arriba?* y *Espera, ese es mi codo.* El sexo no va de cero a un millón de esta manera. No para mí. No es agarrarme al borde del fregadero para evitar gemir, o la necesidad de frotarme contra algo, lo que sea, ni sentir que mis rodillas se debilitan hasta convertirse en gelatina.

—¿Esto es lo que querías, Mara? —Desliza un dedo debajo de mis bragas y separa mis pliegues. Un solo dedo—. Lo que… *Oh.*

Por un momento, entro en pánico. No es posible que ya esté mojada, todavía no. Pero luego me doy cuenta de que lo estoy, y puedo sentirlo y escucharlo, el deslizamiento resbaladizo de piel contra piel, mi propio cuerpo ya comienza a agitarse.

Y Liam deja claro que le gusta.

—Tú —gruñe en mi oído—. No creerías las cosas que he pensado en hacer.

—¿Las…?

—¿Es así como lo querías?

—Quería… ¿qué?

—Dijiste que querías que te follaran. Duro y rápido. —¿Había dicho yo eso? no puedo recordar. No puedo recordar mi propio nombre, y luego las cosas empeoran aún más: detrás de mí, se arrodilla. ¿Que está…? —Fuera. —Liam tira de mis vaqueros y bragas hasta que se acumulan alrededor de mis tobillos, luego los arroja al otro lado de la habitación una vez que me los quito—. Buena chica.

Jadeo. ¿Acaba de decir eso? ¿A mí? Pero no puedo pedirle que lo repita, ya que claramente se distrajo un poco en su camino hacia arriba. Su mano viaja a lo largo de la parte interna de mi muslo, sus largos dedos agarran la suave piel de mi trasero. Es en ese momento cuando me doy cuenta de que estoy desnuda. Completamente desnuda

excepto por una camiseta endeble y un sostén aún más endeble. Y esa persona que muerde suavemente la carne de mi trasero como si fuera una fruta madura, esta persona es Liam Harding.

Liam. Harding. Que me toca como si ya conociera mi cuerpo. Que me separa como si fuera un libro de derecho y entierra su rostro en mí. Quien gime en mi carne y murmura:

—Lo siento. —Se las arregla para sonar genuinamente arrepentido mientras se aleja para lamer y chupar la piel de mi nalga derecha—. Sé que lo quieres duro y rápido. Solo que… he pensado mucho en este momento. En ti. —Un latido pasa, y está de pie otra vez, con el pecho presionado contra mi espalda. Una mano se aprieta dulcemente alrededor de mi cadera, y empuja una rodilla entre mis piernas, hasta que la mayor parte de mi peso descansa sobre su muslo. Escucho sonidos vagamente obscenos: el tintineo de un cinturón, el susurro de una cremallera y luego de la tela de lo que supongo sean pantalones siendo deslizadas. Luego es la carne caliente siendo empujada contra la mía y un murmullo—, ¿Está esto bien? —a la que debo haber asentido, porque…

Lo próximo que siento es *fricción.*

Mi visión se vuelve borrosa en los bordes. Liam está dentro de mí. Apenas. Solo la punta. También es enorme, se abre camino en mi interior, implacable, encantador, magnífico. *Profundo.*

—Maldición, Mara. Esto es *irreal.*

Hay mucha respiración áspera, y un «solo un poco más» y músculos tensos que se contraen y se relajan, pero él toca fondo, y es casi demasiado. Sería demasiado, pero ayuda el hecho de que Liam se aferre a mí como si soltarse lo mataría, o que sus dedos se sientan inestables mientras aparta el cabello de mi hombro. Pero mi cuerpo parece estar encantado con esto, hay espacios ocultos, sin usar, que de repente se encuentran repletos y palpitando alrededor de… Dios.

Alrededor del miembro de Liam.

—No puedo pensar cuando *estás* cerca. —Su voz es áspera. Se mantiene quieto dentro de mí, como si no tuviera prisa por comenzar, pero puedo sentirlo vibrar de tensión. La base de la palma de su mano se desliza hacia abajo para descansar contra mi clítoris—. No puedo pensar cuando *no estás* cerca. Ha sido un problema. Siento que no he formulado un pensamiento coherente en meses. Siento que no dejarás de estar en mi cabeza y…

Solo así, todo ha terminado. Liam ni siquiera se ha movido todavía, pero mi mente se queda en blanco. El mundo retrocede y empiezo a correrme sin previo aviso, arqueándome contra él, mordiéndome el labio para silenciar un grito. El placer se hunde en mí y soy incapaz de detenerlo.

No sé cuánto tiempo pasa antes de que vuelva a mí misma, su respiración aguda en mi oído.

—¿Acabas de…? —Liam suena como si estuviera dolorido—. ¿Realmente te viniste, por el solo hecho de…?

Estoy aturdida. Mis terminaciones nerviosas todavía están hormigueando. Cierro los ojos con fuerza y asiento con vergüenza justo cuando sus dientes se cierran alrededor de la parte carnosa de mi hombro. Gruñe como un animal, como si estuviera desesperado por mantener todo el control que pueda.

—Maldición, Mara, tú… ¿Puedo llevarte a la cama?

Su tono es diferente a todo lo que he escuchado de él, suplicante y un poco crudo. Todavía está retorciéndose dentro de mí; cada pocos segundos más o menos parece perder el control que tiene sobre sí mismo y gira las caderas. No ayuda a mi concentración. O a su concentración. A *nuestra* concentración.

A la que tal vez deberíamos aferrarnos. Esto debería parar ahora mismo, tal vez. Tan bueno como ha sido (y acaba de redefinir el sexo para mí), no estoy muy segura de por qué Liam quiere esto, y si es solo

un polvo improvisado que no significa nada para él, pero que tiene reservado un corazón roto para mí… ¿Quizás deberíamos parar aquí?

—Trataré de mantenerlo rápido. —Está lamiendo el escozor que su mordisco anterior dejó en mi hombro—. Pero déjame llevarte a la cama.

La cosa es que no quiero parar. Ya me he corrido una vez, sólo porque se ha deslizado dentro de mí y la fricción ha sido demasiado, por la sensación de su mano agarrando el hueso de mi cadera, un pequeño milagro en sí mismo, ya que normalmente me lleva una eternidad. Pero si dejo que me lleve a la cama, me va a destrozar. Me va a arruinar para cualquier otra persona. Me va a destruir de todas y cada una de las maneras posibles.

—Por favor —murmura.

Realmente no tengo elección: quiero decir que sí, así que asiento con la cabeza. *Lo que quieras, puedes tenerlo, Liam.*

No es bonito, cuando se retira. Jadea de pura frustración y está claro que lo odia. Yo también lo odio, y soy la que acaba de tener un orgasmo que me ha cambiado la vida. Liam es el que me lo ha dado y ha tomado muy poco para sí mismo, lo que ni siquiera me sorprende.

No me habría enamorado de un hombre poco amable.

Me quita la camiseta y el sujetador, y estoy demasiado atontada por las réplicas de placer como para hacer otra cosa que quedarme allí y dejarlo, verlo mirar fijamente hasta llenarse con ojos oscuros e ilegibles, a pesar de que estoy completamente desnuda y mi ombligo sigue siendo horrible y la cicatriz de lacrosse está allí, brillando blanca en las luces tenues de la habitación.

—Ven aquí. Mara, tu… Mierda. Ven aquí. —Su mandíbula está tensa mientras me carga y me lleva a su habitación. Es mi primera vez aquí, pero conozco este lugar porque conozco a Liam. Colores oscuros. Fotografías enmarcadas de naturaleza semihostil de los viajes que me ha contado. Muebles escasos. Una pila de libros en su mesita de noche.

Los anteojos para leer, con los que me burlo de él, están desplegados en medio de su escritorio. Quiero explorar cada rincón, pero no hay tiempo. El colchón rebota debajo de mi espalda y luego Liam ocupa todo mi campo de visión.

—¿Puedo besarte? —Su boca se cierne unos centímetros por encima de la mía, así que presiono mis manos en su nuca y me arqueo hacia él, besándolo yo misma.

Es lento, cálido y dolorosamente cuidadoso. Me estaba follando hace menos de un minuto. Estaba tan dentro de mí que me sentí deliciosamente partida en dos. Pero ahora hay este suave deslizamiento de labios y lenguas, Liam mordisqueándome, sosteniendo primero mi barbilla, luego la parte posterior de mi cabeza, y mi corazón canta por él.

Estoy catastrófica y ruinosamente enamorada de ti.

—Me encanta besarte —suspiro en su boca.

—Mara. —Sus labios. Su voz—. Quiero besarte por todas partes. —Retrocede, como si algo se le ocurriera en ese momento—. ¿Puedo follarte con la boca?

Siento mis mejillas calentarse. ¿Realmente quiere?

—Solo por un minuto —agrega, y luego… Es increíble cómo ahora si está esperando mi respuesta. Cuando hace unos minutos simplemente me inclinó sobre el fregadero de la cocina y se deslizó dentro de mí y me hizo correrme, pero ahora me está pidiendo permiso para comerme como si *yo* le estuviera haciendo *un favor*.

—¿Estás seguro?

—Treinta segundos. Por favor.

—Sí. Quiero decir, si… si estás seguro de que… Oh.

Es muy hábil en eso. No… Tal vez no sea muy hábil, pero está completamente perdido en ello, tan minucioso, tan ruidoso en su total

y asombrado disfrute del acto, de mí. Mis caderas se arquean y él tiene que sujetarme, sosteniéndome a través del placer. Dura más de treinta segundos. O más de tres minutos, tal vez más de diez, pero mis muslos están temblando y mi vagina tiene espasmos y empiezo a correrme como una ola del océano, y cuando creo que el placer finalmente está disminuyendo, desliza dos dedos dentro de mí y mis caderas se elevan, porque no ha terminado. Mi mundo entero da vueltas. Oficialmente he tenido más orgasmos en los últimos veinte minutos que en el último año.

Con sus dedos todavía dentro de mí, levanta la vista, sus ojos son suaves y serios y están completamente tragados por sus pupilas.

—Gracias.

Vaya.

—Creo… —Me aclaro la garganta. Mi voz sigue siendo áspera—. Tal vez debería ser yo quien te agradezca.

Sacude la cabeza y se levanta sobre mí, en equilibrio sobre un brazo, y mis ojos se abren de par en par. Se acaricia con la otra mano mientras me mira los pechos con expresión de asombro.

—Esto es tan bueno, Mara. Eres tan exquisita. ¿Por qué quieres que sea rápido? —Se inclina para besarme de nuevo, lamiendo el interior de mi boca, mordisqueando mi garganta—. Solo quiero hacerlo durar —gime contra mi piel.

No tengo idea de a qué se refiere. No quiero que esto sea rápido. Nunca he dicho que lo quisiera, pero él sigue diciéndome eso…

Excepto que sí *lo* dije. Mierda, lo dije. Simplemente no a *él.*

—Me escuchaste.

Liam está demasiado ocupado para escucharme. Lamiendo uno de mis pezones. Mordiendo suavemente. Lamiendo de nuevo. Haciendo un trabajo *fantástico.*

—Me escuchaste —repito. Enrosco mis dedos en su cabello para frenarlo—. El otro día mientras hablaba por teléfono.

Se detiene, pero no levanta la cabeza. Su aliento, cálido contra mi pecho, me hace temblar.

—¿Recuerdas cuando te encontré en mi baño? No he dejado de pensar en tus tetas desde entonces.

—Liam, me escuchaste contarles a mis amigas sobre… —Actualmente vuelve a estar ocupado chupando la parte inferior de mi pecho, pero por alguna razón no me atrevo a repetir las palabras—. Sobre lo que quería que hicieras. Me escuchaste.

Él mira hacia arriba. Está sonrojado, excitado y más hermoso que nunca.

—Puedo hacerlo, Mara. Lo puedo hacer por ti. Lo que quieras.

—Yo no… —Esto es mortificante. Lo empujo, pero apenas se mueve—. Si esto es algún tipo de caridad, no necesito tu lástima. Soy perfectamente capaz de…

Me coge la palma de la mano y la arrastra por su pecho, pasando por su abdomen, hasta que su miembro está caliente en mi mano. Es enorme, y casi automáticamente mis dedos se cierran alrededor de él. Liam suelta un gruñido, mordiéndose el labio inferior, y de repente me doy cuenta de que me ha estado tocando de todas las maneras posibles, pero yo no le he tocado todavía, en absoluto. Me parece triste, injusto e insoportablemente estúpido. Algo que hay que necesito remediar.

—¿Se siente como si te estuviera dando una follada por lástima?

No. No, definitivamente no. Pero.

—No lo sé.

Por su propia voluntad, mi mano comienza a moverse hacia arriba y hacia abajo, movimientos simples que lo hacen jadear y cerrar los ojos.

Sus labios se abren mientras rodeo la cabeza húmeda con mi pulgar. El brazo en el que se apoya tiembla. Visiblemente.

—Vamos, Mara. —Sus caderas están empujando, ahora. Dentro y fuera de mi puño. Se está acercando. Más cerca de algo—. Lo tienes que saber.

—¿Saber qué?

—Lo difícil que ha sido… *mierda*… mantener mis manos lejos de ti. Lo mucho que he deseado esto, casi desde el principio.

Oh.

Oh Dios.

Sus ojos están vidriosos, los músculos tensos. Está a punto de venirse, eso es obvio. Tan obvio que me sorprendo cuando sus dedos se envuelven alrededor de mi muñeca para detenerme.

—Por favor, déjame follarte. Déjame darte lo que necesitas. Déjame intentarlo, al menos. —Besa un lugar debajo de mi mandíbula—. Duro y rápido.

No voy a decirle que no. No voy a decirme a *mí misma que* no. En lugar de eso, sonrío y tiro de él sobre mí, con los brazos entrelazados alrededor de su cuello mientras muevo mis labios en silencio contra la carne de su hombro diciéndole cuánto me gusta, cuánto amo esto, y Liam nos ajusta y se inclina hasta que está casi dentro de nuevo, caliente y húmedo y… se me ocurre el pensamiento más molesto. *Mierda.*

—¡Condón! Necesitamos… ¿tú…?

Liam gime.

—*Maldición*. —Sus bíceps están temblando, sus nudillos están blancos de cerrar los puños en las sábanas. Luego respira hondo y cambia de posición, reorganizándose hasta que puede deslizar un

dedo, dos, profundamente dentro de mí, curvándolos hacia arriba para que rocen exactamente donde lo necesito.

—¿Qué vas a…? —Dios, esto se siente increíblemente bien.

—No tengo condones. —Sus palabras son un poco arrastradas—. Solo voy a hacer que te corras así una vez más y luego me correré. —Suena como si estuviera haciendo la cosa más difícil de su vida y, sin embargo, está claro que está absolutamente bien con eso. Lo cual… No, no, no, no, *no*.

—Liam, ¿estás… *ah*… estás limpio? —Su pulgar roza mi clítoris y gimo—. Porque estoy tomando la píldora, y…

—No tengo ni idea.

¿Cómo es que no lo sabe? Me agacho para sujetar su antebrazo. El problema es que todavía puede curvar los dedos. Sus largos y hermosos dedos.

—¿Te has hecho la prueba, desde la última vez que…?

Me preparo para todo tipo de respuestas horribles, que van desde: «*Por supuesto que no, mi última aventura de una noche fue ayer*», a «*Todo el mundo tiene VPH, de todos modos*». Pero lo que en realidad dice es:

—He tenido un montón de exámenes físicos anuales para el trabajo. Yo… Mara, no importa. —Me besa en la mejilla, y un inteligente giro de su muñeca hace que mi cerebro se quede en blanco—. Creo que puedo hacer que te corras con mis dedos. Eso es seguro. Y no tienes que estar aquí más tarde, cuando yo…

¿Exámenes físicos anuales? *¿Plural?*

—¿Cuándo fue la última vez que tuviste sexo? ¿Puedes… *ah*, por favor, por favor, dejar de hacer eso?

—No tengo ni idea. —Liam saca sus dedos. Por un segundo, la fricción me distrae. Entonces mi vagina se aprieta en señal de protesta—. No tengo sexo, Mara.

— Tú… ¿Tu qué?

Mira hacia otro lado. Los dos respiramos demasiado fuerte.

—No me gusta el sexo.

Miro hacia abajo. Está tan duro. Su pene es tan pesado en mi muslo. Hay líquido pre-seminal en mi piel.

—Parece… um, parece que te gusta.

—Sí. Pero realmente no lo hago, es solo… —Él sostiene mi mirada. Los suyos son de un marrón oscuro y hermoso—. Me *gustas* mucho, Mara. Me gusta hablar contigo. Me gusta verte hacer yoga. Me gusta la forma en que siempre hueles a protector solar. Me gusta cómo te las arreglas para decir casi todo lo que quieres sin dejar de ser increíblemente amable. Me gusta estar en esta casa contigo y todo lo que hacemos aquí. —Su garganta se mueve—. No creo que sea una sorpresa que realmente *me* guste la idea de follarte.

Oh, dios mío. Oh, Dios mío, Dios mío, Dios mío, Dios mío…

—Pero no necesito hacerlo… Estoy disfrutando esto —hace una mueca, como si estuviera horrorizado por el eufemismo—, tal vez demasiado, ya que casi me he corrido… en numerables ocasiones, solo por estar cerca de ti, así que estaré más que bien si me dejas cuidar de ti y…

No.

Empujo su hombro, su pecho, y luego sigo empujando a través de su expresión, primero resignada, luego confusa y luego sorprendida. Una vez que su espalda está sobre el colchón, me deja montar a horcajadas sobre sus caderas y gime.

—¿Qué estás haciendo?

Me inclino y le susurro al oído:

—Duro y rápido, Liam.

Hay un largo momento en el que solo me mira, desorientado. Entonces debe darse cuenta: estamos perfectamente alineados. Estoy trabajando para llevarlo adentro, luchando un poco, porque se siente aún más *grande* en esta posición. Pero ahora me estoy moviendo, equilibrando las palmas de mis manos sobre su pecho, subiendo y bajando y subiendo otra vez, y unos minutos más tarde, en el movimiento descendente, está completamente encajado dentro de mí.

El ángulo es tan profundo que mi visión se vuelve borrosa. El agarre de Liam se clava casi dolorosamente alrededor de mi cintura.

—Mara. —Está jadeando—. No voy a ser capaz de retirarme.

—Está bien. —Es *perfecto*—. Solo haz que se sienta bien.

Todo lo que hace se siente bien, de todos modos. El deslizamiento de la carne, la fricción húmeda, incluso dentro del torpe desorden de nuestros movimientos, cuando se desliza fuera y tiene que empujarse hacia adentro una vez más, se siente como pura perfección. La forma en que mira mi rostro, mis senos, el subir y bajar de mis caderas, mirando atónito; los sonidos húmedos y sucios de nosotros moviéndose juntos; las cosas que dice sobre lo hermosa que soy, lo preciosa, sobre todas las veces que se ha imaginado haciendo esto, y han sido tantas.

Siento mi pulso acelerado, y le sonrío mientras me inclino hacia adelante. *Te amo*, pienso. *Y sospecho que tú también me amas. Y no puedo esperar a que lo admitamos el uno al otro. No puedo esperar a ver qué sucede después.*

—Creo —gruñe contra mi garganta—. Mara, creo que me voy a correr ahora.

Asiento, demasiado cerca para hablar, y dejo que nos haga rodar.

* * *

—Bien. Eso fue ciertamente rápido. —Liam aún no ha recuperado el aliento. Su tono es ligeramente autodespectivo.

—Síp. —Delicioso. Fue *delicioso.*

—Puedo hacerlo mejor —dice. Estoy bastante segura de que no tiene ni idea de que esto *era* mejor. Mejor de lo que alguna vez ha sido para mí—. Creo. Tal vez con la práctica.

Ni siquiera estoy segura de que haya terminado aún. Mis terminaciones nerviosas todavía se contraen. Todo mi cuerpo está inundado con una especie de placer eléctrico, que ha sido arrancado de mí y luego vertido dentro de nuevo.

—No fue tan *rápido* —le digo.

Liam entierra su rostro en mi cuello y se enrosca a mi alrededor, empequeñeciéndome. Sí, *fue* rápido.

—Quiero decir —murmuro contra su pecho— que no fue *demasiado* rápido. Fue… —Extraordinario. Espectacular. Trascendente—. Bueno. Muy bueno. —Presiona un beso en mi garganta y agrego—: Pero tampoco fue tan duro.

Él se tensa.

—Lo siento. Tú…

—Es decir, deberíamos hacerlo otra vez. —Se aparta para mirarme a los ojos. Se ve muy, *muy* serio. Yo, por otro lado, me siento considerablemente menos seria—. Y otra vez. Y otra vez. Hasta que lo hagamos bien. Perfectamente duro y perfectamente rápido. ¿Sabes?

Su sonrisa se despliega lentamente.

—¿Sí? —Esperanzado y feliz, se ve más joven que nunca. Sonrío y tiro de él para darle un beso.

—Sí, Liam.

Epilogo

Seis meses después

—¿Quién pone crema para café en sus batidos, de todos modos?

—La gente.

—De ningún modo.

—Mucha gente.

—Nombra uno.

—Yo.

Pongo los ojos en blanco.

—Nombra dos.

Silencio.

—¿Ves?

Liam suspira.

—No significa nada, Mara. La gente normal no tiene conversaciones sobre la crema de café.

—Tú y yo ciertamente lo hacemos. ¿Avellana o vainilla?

—Vainilla.

Pongo dos botellas en el carrito. Luego me pongo de puntillas y planto un beso en la boca de Liam, corto y fuerte. Liam me sigue un poco cuando doy un paso atrás, como si no quisiera dejarme ir.

—Okey. —Sonrío. Últimamente, siempre estoy sonriendo—. ¿Qué más?

Liam examina la lista que escribí hoy, sentada entre sus muslos mientras él estaba ocupado matando a los malos en la PlayStation. Él entrecierra un poco los ojos ante mi terrible letra, y trato de no reírme.

—Creo que hemos terminado. ¿A menos que necesites unas cuantas cajas más de Cheez-It de tamaño familiar?

Le saco la lengua. Mi mano cae a mi costado, hasta que roza la suya. Empieza a empujar el carrito de la compra y entrelaza nuestros dedos.

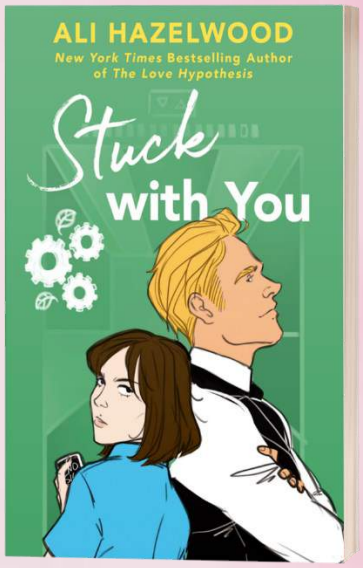
—¿Lista para irnos? —pregunta.

—Sí —respondo—. Vamos a casa.

Ali Hazelwood

Ali Hazelwood es una autora multipublicado, por desgracia, de artículos revisados por pares sobre la ciencia del cerebro, en los que nadie se besa y el para siempre no siempre es feliz. Originaria de Italia, vivió en Alemania y Japón antes de mudarse a los Estados Unidos para realizar un doctorado. en neurociencia. Recientemente se convirtió en profesora, lo que la aterroriza por completo. Cuando Ali no está en el trabajo, se la puede encontrar corriendo, comiendo cake pops o viendo películas de ciencia ficción con sus dos señores felinos (y su esposo un poco menos felino).

Proximo Libro



Nada como una pequeña rivalidad entre científicos para llevar el amor al siguiente nivel.

Mara, Sadie y Hannah son amigas primero, científicas siempre. Aunque sus campos de estudio puedan llevarlas a diferentes rincones del mundo, todas pueden estar de acuerdo en esta verdad universal: cuando se trata de amor y ciencia, los opuestos se atraen y los rivales te hacen arder...

Lógicamente, Sadie sabe que se supone que los ingenieros civiles construyen puentes. Sin embargo, como mujer de STEM, también entiende que las variables pueden cambiar, y cuando estás atrapada durante horas en un pequeño ascensor de Nueva York con el hombre que te rompió el corazón, te ganas el derecho de quemar ese puente musculoso y rubio. Erik puede disculparse todo lo que quiera, pero para citar a su líder rebelde, preferiría besar a un wookiee[7].

Ni siquiera el más sofisticado de los rituales supersticiosos de Sadie podría haber predicho una reunión tan desastrosa. Pero mientras se niega a reconocer el canto de sirena de los antebrazos de acero de Erik o la forma en que su voz se suaviza cuando le ofrece su suéter, Sadie no puede evitar preguntarse si podría haber más capas en su némesis de corazón frío de las que se ven a simple vista. Tal vez, posiblemente, incluso los puentes quemados todavía se pueden cruzar…

[7] Los wookiees, que ellos lo traducen como la Gente de los Árboles, eran una especie de peludos humanoides bípedos que habitaban en el planeta Kashyyyk. Uno de los miembros más destacados de la especie fue Chewbacca, amigo y copiloto de Han Solo, que desempeñó un papel vital en la Guerra Civil Galáctica

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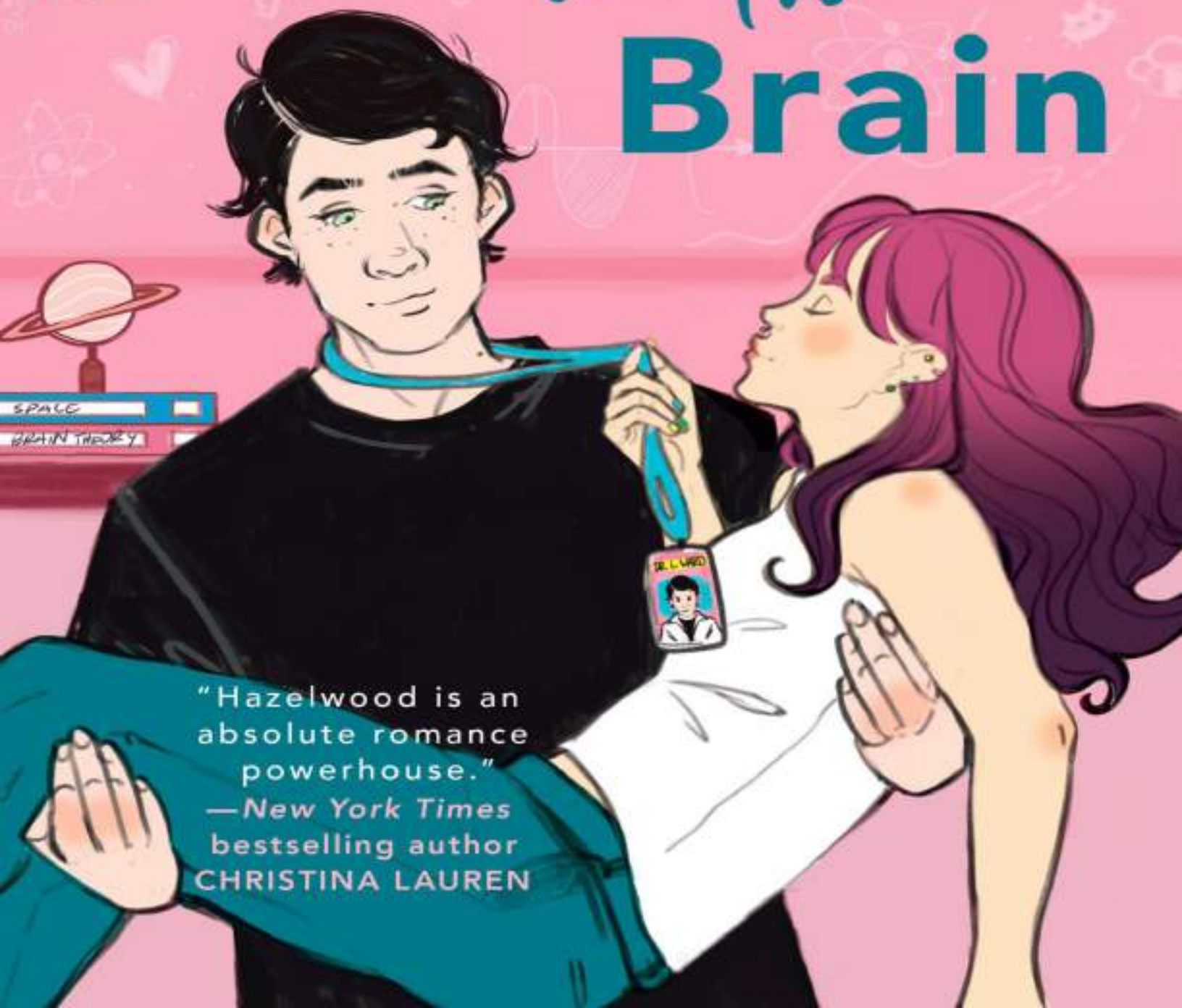
ALI HAZELWOOD

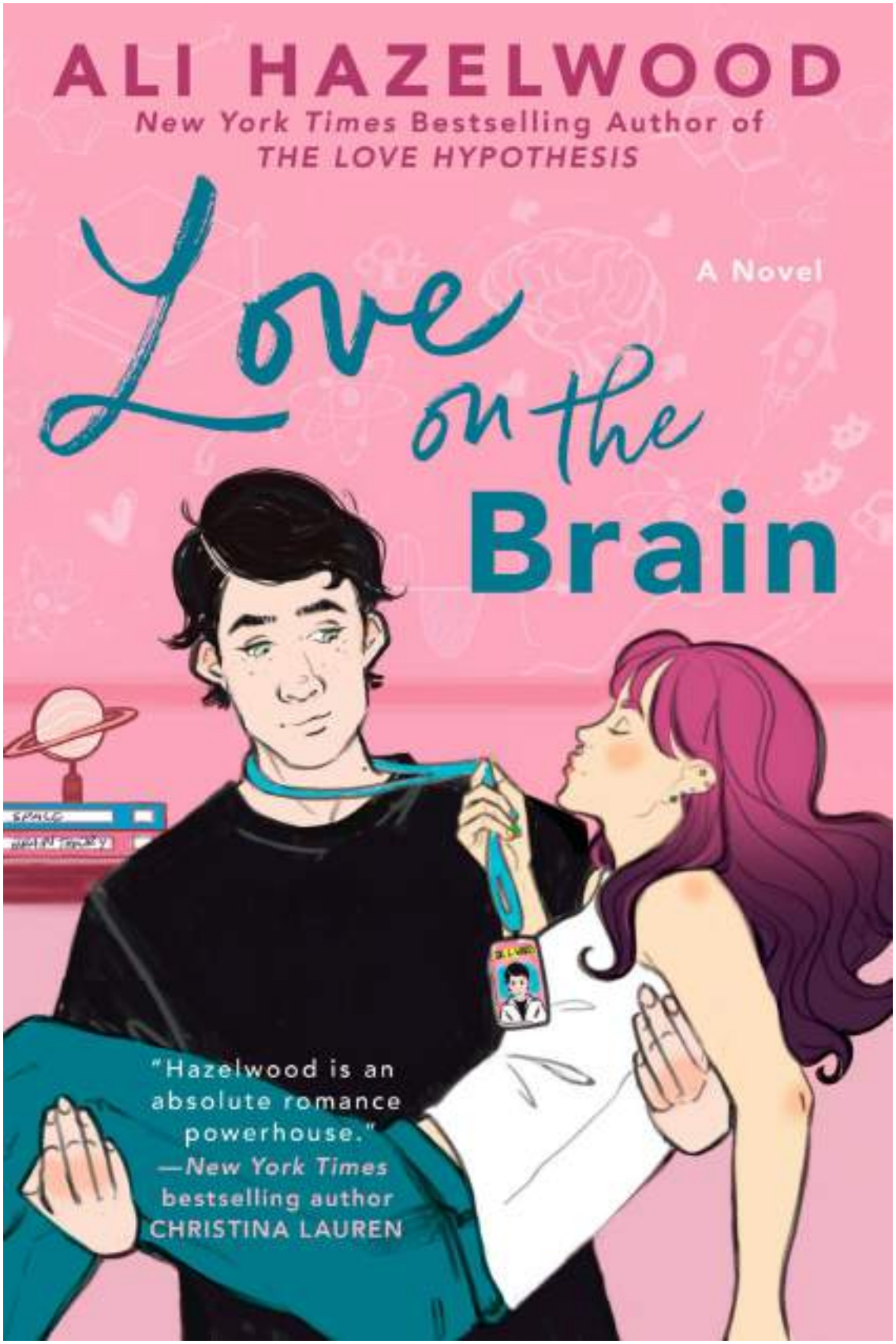
New York Times Bestselling Author of
THE LOVE HYPOTHESIS

Love on the Brain

A Novel



"Hazelwood is an absolute romance powerhouse."
—*New York Times* bestselling author CHRISTINA LAUREN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Praise for

THE LOVE HYPOTHESIS

"Contemporary romance's unicorn: the elusive marriage of deeply brainy and delightfully escapist. . . . *The Love Hypothesis* has wild commercial appeal, but the quieter secret is that there is a specific audience, made up of all of the Olives in the world, who have deeply, ardently waited for this exact book."

—*New York Times* bestselling author Christina Lauren

"Funny, sexy, and smart. Ali Hazelwood did a terrific job with *The Love Hypothesis*."

—*New York Times* bestselling author Mariana Zapata

"This tackles one of my favorite tropes—Grumpy meets Sunshine—in a fun and utterly endearing way. . . . I loved the nods toward fandom and romance novels, and I couldn't put it down. Highly recommended!"

—*New York Times* bestselling author Jessica Clare

"A beautifully written romantic comedy with a heroine you will instantly fall in love with, *The Love Hypothesis* is destined to earn a place on your keeper shelf."

—Elizabeth Everett, author of *A Lady's Formula for Love*

"Smart, witty dialogue and a diverse cast of likable secondary characters. . . . A realistic, amusing novel that readers won't be able to put down."

—*Library Journal* (starred review)

"With whip-smart and endearing characters, snappy prose, and a quirky take on a favorite trope, Hazelwood convincingly navigates the fraught

shoals of academia. . . . This smart, sexy contemporary should delight a wide swath of romance lovers."

—Publishers Weekly

TITLES BY ALI HAZELWOOD

• • •

The Love Hypothesis
Love on the Brain

LOATHE TO LOVE YOU
Under One Roof
Stuck with You
Below Zero

LOVE on the BRAIN

ALI HAZELWOOD

JOVE
NEW YORK

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To my Grems. [Insert DolphinBoob.gif]

1

THE HABENULA: DISAPPOINTMENT

HERE'S MY FAVORITE piece of trivia in the whole world: Dr. Marie Skłodowska-Curie showed up to her wedding ceremony wearing her lab gown.

It's actually a pretty cool story: a scientist friend hooked her up with Pierre Curie. They awkwardly admitted to having read each other's papers and flirted over beakers full of liquid uranium, and he proposed within the year. But Marie was only meant to be in France to get her degree, and reluctantly rejected him to return to Poland.

Womp womp.

Enter the University of Krakow, villain and unintentional cupid of this story, which denied Marie a faculty position because she was a woman (very classy, U of K). Dick move, I know, but it had the fortunate side effect of pushing Marie right back into Pierre's loving, not-yet-radioactive arms. Those two beautiful nerds married in 1895, and Marie, who wasn't exactly making bank at the time, bought herself a wedding dress that was comfortable enough to use in the lab every day. My girl was nothing if not pragmatic.

Of course, this story becomes significantly less cool if you fast forward ten years or so, to when Pierre got himself run over by a carriage and left

Marie and their two daughters alone in the world. Zoom into 1906, and that's where you'll find the real moral of this tale: trusting people to stick around is a bad idea. One way or another they'll end up gone. Maybe they'll slip on the Rue Dauphine on a rainy morning and get their skull crushed by a horse-drawn cart. Maybe they'll be kidnapped by aliens and vanish into the vastness of space. Or maybe they'll have sex with your best friend six months before you're due to get married, forcing you to call off the wedding and lose tons of cash in security deposits.

The sky's the limit, really.

One might say, then, that U of K is only a minor villain. Don't get me wrong: I love picturing Dr. Curie waltzing back to Krakow *Pretty Woman*–style, wearing her wedding-slash-lab gown, brandishing her two Nobel Prize medals, and yelling, "Big Mistake. Big. *Huge*." But the real villain, the one that had Marie crying and staring at the ceiling in the late hours of the night, is loss. Grief. The intrinsic transience of human relationships. The real villain is love: an unstable isotope, constantly undergoing spontaneous nuclear decay.

And it will forever go unpunished.

Do you know what's reliable instead? What never, *ever* abandoned Dr. Curie in all her years? Her curiosity. Her discoveries. Her accomplishments.

Science. *Science* is where it's at.

Which is why when NASA notifies me—*Me! Bee Königswasser!*—that I've been chosen as lead investigator of BLINK, one of their most prestigious neuroengineering research projects, I screech. I screech loudly and joyously in my minuscule, windowless office on the Bethesda campus of the National Institutes of Health. I screech about the amazing performance-enhancing technology I'm going to get to build for none other than NASA astronauts, and then I remember that the walls are toilet-paper thin and that my left neighbor once filed a formal complaint against me for listening to nineties female alt-rock without headphones. So I press the back of my hand to my mouth, bite into it, and jump up and down as silently as possible while elation explodes inside me.

I feel just like I imagine Dr. Curie must have felt when she was finally allowed to enroll at the University of Paris in late 1891: as though a world of (preferably nonradioactive) scientific discoveries is finally within grasping distance. It is, by far, the most momentous day of my life, and kicks off a *phenomenal* weekend of celebrations. Highlights are:

- I tell the news to my three favorite colleagues, and we go out to our usual bar, guzzle several rounds of lemon drops, and take turns doing hilarious impressions of that time Trevor, our ugly middle-aged boss, asked us not to fall in love with him. (Academic men tend to harbor many delusions—except for Pierre Curie, of course. Pierre would never.)

- I change my hair from pink to purple. (I have to do it at home, because junior academics can't afford salons; my shower ends up looking like a mix between a cotton candy machine and a unicorn slaughterhouse, but after the raccoon incident—which, believe me, you don't want to know about—I wasn't going to get my security deposit back anyway.)

- I take myself to Victoria's Secret and buy a set of pretty green lingerie, not allowing myself to feel guilty at the expense (even though it's been many years since someone has seen me without clothes, and if I have my way no one will for many, many more).

- I download the Couch-to-Marathon plan I've been meaning to start and do my first run. (Then I limp back home cursing my overambition and promptly downgrade to a Couch-to-5K program. I can't believe that some people work out *every day*.)

- I bake treats for Finneas, my elderly neighbor's equally elderly cat, who often visits my apartment for second dinner. (He shreds my

favorite pair of Converse in gratitude. Dr. Curie, in her infinite wisdom, was probably a dog person.)

In short, I have an absolute blast. I'm not even sad when Monday comes. It's same old, same old—experiments, lab meetings, eating Lean Cuisine and shotgunning store-brand LaCroix at my desk while crunching data—but with the prospect of BLINK, even the old feels new and exciting.

I'll be honest: I've been worried sick. After having four grant applications rejected in less than six months, I was sure that my career was stalling—maybe even over. Whenever Trevor called me into his office, I'd get palpitations and sweaty palms, sure that he'd tell me that my yearly contract wasn't going to be renewed. The last couple of years since graduating with my Ph.D. haven't been a whole lot of fun.

But that's over with. Contracting for NASA is a career-making opportunity. After all, I've been chosen after a ruthless selection process over golden boys like Josh Martin, Hank Malik, even Jan Vanderberg, that horrid guy who trash-talks my research like it's an Olympic sport. I've had my setbacks, plenty of them, but after nearly two decades of being obsessed with the brain, here I am: lead neuroscientist of BLINK. I'll design gears for *astronauts*, gears they'll use in *space*. This is how I get out of Trevor's clammy, sexist clutches. This is what buys me a long-term contract and my own lab with my own line of research. This is the turning point in my professional life—which, truthfully, is the only kind of life I care to have.

For several days I'm ecstatic. I'm exhilarated. I'm ecstatically exhilarated.

Then, on Monday at 4:33 p.m., my email pings with a message from NASA. I read the name of the person who will be co-leading BLINK with me, and all of a sudden I'm none of those things anymore.

• • •

"DO YOU REMEMBER Levi Ward?"

"*Brennt da etwas*—uh?" Over the phone, Mareike's voice is thick and sleep-laden, muffled by poor reception and long distance. "Bee? Is that you? What time is it?"

"Eight fifteen in Maryland and . . ." I rapidly calculate the time difference. A few weeks ago Reike was in Tajikistan, but now she's in . . . Portugal, maybe? "Two a.m. your time."

Reike grunts, groans, moans, and makes a whole host of other sounds I'm all too familiar with from sharing a room with her for the first two decades of our lives. I sit back on my couch and wait it out until she asks, "Who died?"

"No one died. Well, I'm sure *someone* died, but no one we know. Were you really sleeping? Are you sick? Should I fly out?" I'm genuinely concerned that my sister isn't out clubbing, or skinny-dipping in the Mediterranean Sea, or frolicking with a coven of warlocks based in the forests of the Iberian Peninsula. Sleeping at night is very out of character.

"Nah. I ran out of money again." She yawns. "Been giving private lessons to rich, spoiled Portuguese boys during the day until I make enough to fly to Norway."

I know better than to ask "Why Norway?" since Reike's answer would just be "Why not?" Instead I go with, "Do you need me to send you some money?" I'm not exactly flush with cash, especially after my days of (premature, as it turns out) celebrations, but I could spare a few dollars if I'm careful. And don't eat. For a couple of days.

"Nah, the brats' parents pay well. Ugh, Bee, a twelve-year-old tried to touch my boob yesterday."

"Gross. What did you do?"

"I told him I'd cut off his fingers, of course. Anyway—to what do I owe the pleasure of being brutally awakened?"

"I'm sorry."

"Nah, you're not."

I smile. "Nah, I'm not." What's the point of sharing 100 percent of your DNA with a person if you can't wake them up for an emergency chat? "Remember that research project I mentioned? BLINK?"

“The one you’re leading? NASA? Where you use your fancy brain science to build those fancy helmets to make fancy astronauts better in space?”

“Yes. Sort of. As it turns out, I’m not leading as much as *co*-leading. The funds come from NIH and NASA. They got into a pissing contest over which agency should be in charge, and ultimately decided to have two leaders.” In the corner of my eye I notice a flash of orange—Finneas, lounging on the sill of my kitchen window. I let him in with a few scratches on the head. He meows lovingly and licks my hand. “Do you remember Levi Ward?”

“Is he some guy I dated who’s trying to reach me because he has gonorrhea?”

“Huh? No. He’s someone I met in grad school.” I open the cupboard where I keep the Whiskas. “He was getting a Ph.D. in engineering in my lab, and was in his fifth year when I started—”

“The Wardass!”

“Yep, him!”

“I remember! Wasn’t he like . . . hot? Tall? Built?”

I bite back a smile, pouring food in Finneas’s bowl. “I’m not sure how I feel about the fact that the only thing you remember about my grad school nemesis is that he was six four.” Dr. Marie Curie’s sisters, renowned physician Bronisława Dłuska and educational activist Helena Szalayowa, would never. Unless they were thirsty wenches like Reike—in which case they absolutely would.

“*And* built. You should just be proud of my elephantine memory.”

“And I am. Anyway, I was told who the NASA co-lead for my project will be, and—”

“No way.” Reike must have sat up. Her voice is suddenly crystal clear. “*No way.*”

“Yes way.” I listen to my sister’s maniacal, gleeful cackling while I toss the empty pouch. “You know, you could at least pretend not to enjoy this so much.”

“Oh, I could. But will I?”

“Clearly not.”

“Did you cry when you found out?”

“No.”

“Did you head-desk?”

“No.”

“Don’t lie to me. Do you have a bump on your forehead?”

“. . . Maybe a small one.”

“Oh, Bee. Bee, thank you for waking me up to share this outstanding piece of news. Isn’t The Wardass the guy who said that you were fugly?”

He never did, at least not in those terms, but I laugh so loud, Finneas gives me a startled glance. “I can’t believe you remember *that*.”

“Hey, I resented it a lot. You’re hot AF.”

“You only say so because I look exactly like you.”

“Why, I hadn’t even noticed.”

It’s not completely true, anyway. Yes, Reike and I are both short and slight. We have the same symmetrical features and blue eyes, the same straight dark hair. Still, we’ve long outgrown our *Parent Trap* stage, and at twenty-eight no one would struggle to tell us apart. Not when my hair has been different shades of pastel colors for the past decade, or with my love for piercings and the occasional tattoo. Reike, with her wanderlust and artistic inclinations, is the true free spirit of the family, but she can never be bothered to make free-spirit fashion statements. That’s where I, the supposedly boring scientist, come in to pick up the slack.

“So, was he? The one who insulted me by proxy?”

“Yep. Levi Ward. The one and only.”

I pour water into a bowl for Finneas. It didn’t go *quite* that way. Levi never explicitly insulted me. Implicitly, though . . .

I gave my first academic talk in my second semester of grad school, and I took it very seriously. I memorized the entire speech, redid the PowerPoint six times, even agonized over the perfect outfit. I ended up dressing nicer than usual, and Annie, my grad school best friend, had the well-meaning but unfortunate idea to rope Levi in to complimenting me.

“Doesn’t Bee look extra pretty today?”

It was probably the only topic of conversation she could think of. After all, Annie was always going on about how mysteriously handsome he was, with the dark hair and the broad shoulders and that interesting, unusual face of his; how she wished he'd stop being so reserved and ask her out. Except that Levi didn't seem interested in conversation. He studied me intensely, with those piercing green eyes of his. He stared at me from head to toe for several moments. And then he said . . .

Nothing. Absolutely nothing.

He just made what Tim, my ex-fiancé, later referred to as an "aghast expression," and walked out of the lab with a wooden nod and zero compliments—not even a stilted, fake one. After that, grad school—the ultimate cesspool of gossip—did its thing, and the story took on a life of its own. Students said that he'd puked all over my dress; that he'd begged me on his knees to put a paper bag over my head; that he'd been so horrified, he'd tried to cleanse his brain by drinking bleach and suffered irreparable neurological damage as a consequence. I try not to take myself too seriously, and being part of a meme of sorts was amusing, but the rumors were so wild, I started to wonder if I really was revolting.

Still, I never blamed Levi. I never resented him for refusing to be strong-armed into pretending that he found me attractive. Or . . . well, not-repulsive. He always seemed like such a man's man, after all. Different from the boys that surrounded me. Serious, disciplined, a little broody. Intense and gifted. Alpha, whatever that even means. A girl with a septum piercing and a blue ombré wouldn't conform to his ideals of what pretty ladies should look like, and that's fine.

What I *do* resent Levi for are his other behaviors during the year we overlapped. Like the fact that he never bothered to meet my eyes when I talked to him, or that he always found excuses not to come to journal club when it was my turn to present. I reserve the right to be angry for how he'd slip out of a group conversation the moment I joined, for considering me so beneath his notice that he never even said hi when I walked into the lab, for the way I caught him staring at me with an intense, displeased expression, as though I were some eldritch abomination. I reserve the right to feel bitter

that after Tim and I got engaged, Levi pulled him aside and told him that he could do much better than me. Come on, who *does* that?

Most of all, I reserve the right to detest him for making it clear that he believed me to be a mediocre scientist. The rest I could have overlooked easily enough, but the lack of respect for my work . . . I'll forever grind my axe for that.

That is, until I wedge it in his groin.

Levi became my sworn archenemy on a Tuesday in April, in my Ph.D. advisor's office. Samantha Lee was—and still is—the bomb when it comes to neuroimaging. If there's a way to study a living human's brains without cracking their skull open, Sam either came up with it or mastered it. Her research is brilliant, well-funded, and highly interdisciplinary—hence the variety of Ph.D. students she mentored: cognitive neuroscientists like me, interested in studying the neural bases of behavior, but also computer scientists, biologists, psychologists. Engineers.

Even in the crowded chaos of Sam's lab, Levi stood out. He had a knack for the type of problem-solving Sam liked—the one that elevates neuroimaging to an art. In his first year, he figured out a way to build a portable infrared spectroscopy machine that had been puzzling postdocs for a decade. By his third, he'd revolutionized the lab's data analysis pipeline. In his fourth he got a *Science* publication. And in his fifth, when I joined the lab, Sam called us together into her office.

"There is this amazing project I've been wanting to kick-start," she said with her usual enthusiasm. "If we manage to make it work, it's going to change the entire landscape of the field. And that's why I need my best neuroscientist and my best engineer to collaborate on it."

It was a breezy, early spring afternoon. I remember it well, because that morning had been unforgettable: Tim on one knee, in the middle of the lab, proposing. A bit theatrical, not really my thing, but I wasn't going to complain, not when it meant someone wanted to stand by me for good. So I looked him in the eyes, choked back the tears, and said yes.

A few hours later, I felt the engagement ring bite painfully into my clenched fist. "I don't have time for a collaboration, Sam," Levi said. He

was standing as far away from me as he could, and yet he still managed to fill the small office and become its center of gravity. He didn't bother to glance at me. He never did.

Sam frowned. "The other day you said you'd be on board."

"I misspoke." His expression was unreadable. Uncompromising. "Sorry, Sam. I'm just too busy."

I cleared my throat and took a few steps toward him. "I know I'm just a first-year student," I started, appeasingly, "but I can do my part, I promise. And—"

"That's not it," he said. His eyes briefly caught mine, green and black and stormy cold, and for a brief moment he seemed stuck, as though he couldn't look away. My heart stumbled. "Like I said, I don't have time right now to take on new projects."

I don't remember why I walked out of the office alone, nor why I decided to linger right outside. I told myself that it was fine. Levi was just busy. Everyone was busy. Academia was nothing but a bunch of busy people running around busily. I myself was super busy, because Sam was right: I was one of the best neuroscientists in the lab. I had plenty of my own work going on.

Until I overheard Sam's concerned question: "Why did you change your mind? *You* said that the project was going to be a slam dunk."

"I know. But I can't. I'm sorry."

"Can't what?"

"Work with Bee."

Sam asked him why, but I didn't stop to listen. Pursuing any kind of graduate education requires a healthy dose of masochism, but I drew the line at sticking around while someone trash-talked me to my boss. I stormed off, and by the following week, when I heard Annie chattering happily about the fact that Levi had agreed to help her on her thesis project, I'd long stopped lying to myself.

Levi Ward, His Wardness, Dr. Wardass, despised me.

Me.

Specifically me.

Yes, he was a taciturn, somber, brooding mountain of a man. He was private, an introvert. His temperament was reserved and aloof. I couldn't demand that he like me, and had no intention of doing so. Still, if he could be civil, polite, even friendly with everyone else, he could have made an effort with me, too. But no—Levi Ward clearly despised me, and in the face of such hatred . . .

Well. I had no choice but to hate him back.

"You there?" Reike asks.

"Yeah," I mumble, "just ruminating about Levi."

"He's at NASA, then? Dare I hope he'll be sent to Mars to retrieve *Curiosity*?"

"Sadly, not before he's done co-leading my project." In the past few years, while my career gasped for air like a hippo with sleep apnea, Levi's thrived—obnoxiously so. He published interesting studies, got a huge Department of Defense grant, and, according to an email Sam sent around, even made *Forbes*'s 10 Under 40 list, the science edition. The only reason I've been able to stand his successes without falling on my sword is that his research has been gravitating away from neuroimaging. This made us not-quite-competitors and allowed me to just . . . never think about him. An excellent life hack, which worked superbly—until today.

Honestly, fuck today.

"I'm still enjoying this immensely, but I'll make an effort to be sisterly and sympathetic. How concerned are you to be working with him, on a scale from one to heavily breathing into a paper bag?"

I tip what's left of Finneas's water into a pot of daisies. "I think having to work with someone who thinks I'm a shit scientist warrants at least two inhalers."

"You're amazing. You're the best scientist."

"Aw, thank you." I choose to believe that Reike filing astrology and cristallotherapy under the label "science" only slightly detracts from the compliment. "It's going to be horrible. The worst. If he's anything like he used to be, I'm going to . . . Reike, are you peeing?"

A beat, filled by the noise of running water. ". . . Maybe. Hey, you're the one who woke me and my bladder up. Please, carry on."

I smile and shake my head. "If he's anything like he was at Pitt, he's going to be a nightmare to work with. Plus I'll be on his turf."

"Right, 'cause you're moving to Houston."

"For three months. My research assistant and I are leaving next week."

"I'm jealous. I'm going to be stuck here in Portugal for who knows how long, groped by knockoff Joffrey Baratheons who refuse to learn what a subjunctive is. I'm rotting, Bee."

It will never cease to befuddle me how differently Reike and I reacted to being thrown around like rubber balls during childhood, both before and after our parents' death. We were bounced from one extended family member to another, lived in a dozen countries, and all Reike wants is . . . to live in even *more* countries. Travel, see new places, experience new things. It's like yearning for change is hardwired in her brain. She packed up the day we graduated high school and has been making her way through the continents for the past decade, complaining about being bored after a handful of weeks in one place.

I'm the opposite. I want to put down roots. Security. Stability. I thought I'd get it with Tim, but like I said, relying on others is risky business. Permanence and love are clearly incompatible, so now I'm focusing on my career. I want a long-term position as an NIH scientist, and landing BLINK is the perfect stepping-stone.

"You know what just occurred to me?"

"You forgot to flush?"

"Can't flush at night—noisy European pipes. If I do, my neighbor leaves passive-aggressive notes. But hear me out: three years ago, when I spent that summer harvesting watermelons in Australia, I met this guy from Houston. He was a riot. Cute, too. Bet I can find his email and ask him if he's single—"

"Nope."

"He had really pretty eyes and could touch the tip of his nose with his tongue—that's, like, ten percent of the population."

I make a mental note to look up whether that's true. "I'm going there to work, not to date nose-tongue guy."

"You could do both."

"I don't date."

"Why?"

"You know why."

"No, actually." Reike's tone takes on its usual stubborn quality. "Listen, I know that the last time you dated—"

"I was engaged."

"Same difference. Maybe things didn't go well"—I lift one eyebrow at the most euphemistic euphemism I've ever heard—"and you want to feel safe and practice maintenance of your emotional boundaries, but that can't prevent you from ever dating again. You can't put all your eggs into the science basket. There are other, better baskets. Like the sex basket, and the making-out basket, and the letting-a-boy-pay-for-your-expensive-vegan-dinner basket, and—" Finneas chooses this very moment to meow loudly. Bless his little feline timing. "Bee! Did you get that kitten you've been talking about?"

"It's the neighbor's." I lean over to nuzzle him, a silent thank-you for distracting my sister mid-sermon.

"If you don't want to date nose-tongue guy, at least get a damn cat. You already have that stupid name picked out."

"Meowrie Curie is a great name—and no."

"It's your childhood dream! Remember when we were in Austria? How we'd play Harry Potter and your Patronus was always a kitten?"

"And yours was a blobfish." I smile. We read the books together in German, just a few weeks before moving to our maternal cousin's in the UK, who wasn't exactly thrilled to have us stay in her minuscule spare room. Ugh, I hate moving. I'm sad to leave my objectively-crappy-but-dearly-beloved Bethesda apartment. "Anyway, Harry Potter is tainted forever, and I'm not getting a cat."

"Why?"

“Because it will die in thirteen to seventeen years, based on recent statistical data, and shatter my heart in thirteen to seventeen pieces.”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake.”

“I’ll settle for loving other people’s cats and never knowing when they pass away.”

I hear a thud, probably Reike throwing herself back into bed. “You know what your condition is? It’s called—”

“Not a condition, we’ve been over—”

“—avoidant attachment. You’re pathologically independent and don’t let others come close out of fear that they’ll eventually leave you. You have erected a fence around you—the Bee-fence—and are terrified of anything resembling emotional—” Reike’s voice fades into a jaw-breaking yawn, and I feel a wave of affection for her. Even though her favorite pastime is entering my personality traits into WebMD and diagnosing me with imaginary disorders.

“Go to bed, Reike. I’ll call you soon.”

“Yeah, okay.” Another small yawn. “But I’m right, Beetch. And you’re wrong.”

“Of course. Good night, babe.”

I hang up and spend a few more minutes petting Finneas. When he slips out to the fresh breeze of the early-spring night, I begin to pack. As I fold my skinny jeans and colorful tops, I come across something I haven’t seen in a while: a dress with yellow polka dots over blue cotton—the same blue of Dr. Curie’s wedding gown. Target, spring collection, circa five million years ago. Twelve dollars, give or take. It’s the one I was wearing when Levi decided that I am but a sentient bunion, the most repugnant of nature’s creatures.

I shrug, and stuff it into my suitcase.

2

VAGUS NERVE: BLACKOUT

"BY THE WAY, you can get leprosy from armadillos."

I peel my nose away from the airplane window and glance at Rocío, my research assistant. "Really?"

"Yep. They got it from humans millennia ago, and now they're giving it back to us." She shrugs. "Revenge and cold dishes and all that."

I scrutinize her beautiful face for hints that she's lying. Her large dark eyes, heavily rimmed with eyeliner, are inscrutable. Her hair is so Vantablack, it absorbs 99 percent of visible light. Her mouth is full, curved downward in its typical pout.

Nope. I got nothing. "Is this for real?"

"Would I ever lie to you?"

"Last week you swore to me that Stephen King was writing a Winnie-the-Pooh spin-off." And I believed her. Like I believed that Lady Gaga is a known satanist, or that badminton racquets are made from human bones and intestines. Chaotic goth misanthropy and creepy deadpan sarcasm are her brand, and I should know better than to take her seriously. Problem is, every once in a while she'll throw in a crazy-sounding story that upon further inspection (i.e., a Google search) is revealed to be true. For instance, did

you know that *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* was inspired by a true story? Before Rocío, I didn't. And I slept significantly better.

"Don't believe me, then." She shrugs, going back to her grad school admission prep book. "Go pet the leper armadillos and die."

She's such a weirdo. I adore her.

"Hey, you sure you're going to be fine, away from Alex for the next few months?" I feel a little guilty for taking her away from her boyfriend. When I was twenty-two, if someone had asked me to be apart from Tim for months, I'd have walked into the sea. Then again, hindsight has proven beyond doubt that I was a complete idiot, and Rocío seems pretty enthused over the opportunity. She plans to apply to Johns Hopkins's neuro program in the fall, and the NASA line on her CV won't hurt. She even hugged me when I offered her the chance to come along—a moment of weakness I'm sure she deeply regrets.

"Fine? Are you kidding?" She looks at me like I'm insane. "Three months in Texas, do you know how many times I'll get to see La Llorona?"

"La . . . what?"

She rolls her eyes and pops in her AirPods. "You really know *nothing* about famed feminist ghosts."

I bite back a smile and turn back to the window. In 1905, Dr. Curie decided to invest her Nobel Prize money into hiring her first research assistant. I wonder if she, too, ended up working with a mildly terrifying, Cthulhu-worshipping emo girl. I stare at the clouds until I'm bored, and then I take my phone out of my pocket and connect to the complimentary in-flight Wi-Fi. I glance at Rocío, making sure that she's not paying attention to me, and angle my screen away.

I'm not a very secretive person, mostly out of laziness: I refuse to take on the cognitive labor of tracking lies and omissions. I do, however, have one secret. One single piece of information that I've never shared with anyone—not even my sister. Don't get me wrong, I trust Reike with my life, but I also know her well enough to picture the scene: she is wearing a flowy sundress, flirting with a Scottish shepherd she met in a trattoria on the Amalfi Coast. They decide to do the shrooms they just purchased from a

Belarusian farmer, and mid-trip she accidentally blurts out the one thing she's been expressly forbidden to repeat: her twin sister, Bee, runs one of the most popular and controversial accounts on Academic Twitter. The Scottish shepherd's cousin is a closeted men's rights activist who sends me a dead possum in the mail, rats me out to his insane friends, and I get fired.

No, thank you. I love my job (and possums) too much for this.

I created @WhatWouldMarieDo during my first semester of grad school. I was teaching a neuroanatomy class, and decided to give my students an anonymous mid-semester survey to ask for honest feedback on how to improve the course. What I got was . . . not that. I was told that my lectures would be more interesting if I delivered them naked. That I should gain some weight, get a boob job, stop dying my hair "unnatural colors," get rid of my piercings. I was even given a phone number to call if I was "ever in the mood for a ten-inch dick." (Yeah, right.)

The messages were pretty appalling, but what sent me sobbing in a bathroom stall was the reactions of the other students in my cohort—Tim included. They laughed the comments off as harmless pranks and dissuaded me from reporting them to the department chair, telling me that I'd be making a stink about nothing.

They were, of course, all men.

(Seriously: why *are* men?)

That night I fell asleep crying. The following day I got up, wondered how many other women in STEM felt as alone as I did, and impulsively downloaded Twitter and made @WhatWouldMarieDo. I slapped on a poorly photoshopped pic of Dr. Curie wearing sunglasses and a one-line bio: *Making the periodic table girlier since 1889 (she/her)*. I just wanted to scream into the void. I honestly didn't think that anyone would even see my first tweet. But I was wrong.

> @WhatWouldMarieDo What would Dr. Curie, first female professor at La Sorbonne, do if one of her students asked her to deliver her lectures naked?

@198888 She would shorten his half-life.

@annahhhh RAT HIM OUT TO PIERRE!!!

@emily89 Put some polonium in his pants and watch his dick shrivel.

@bioworm55 Nuke him NUKE HIM

@lucyinthesea Has this happened to you? God I'm so sorry. Once a student said something about my ass and it was so gross and no one believed me.

Over half a decade later, after a handful of *Chronicle of Higher Education* nods, a *New York Times* article, and about a million followers, WWMD is my happy place. What's best is, I think the same is true for many others. The account has evolved into a therapeutic community of sorts, used by women in STEM to tell their stories, exchange advice, and . . . bitch.

Oh, we bitch. We bitch a lot, and it's glorious.

@BiologySarah Hey, @WhatWouldMarieDo if she weren't given authorship on a project that was originally her idea and that she worked on for over one year? All other authors are men, because *of course* they are.

"Yikes." I scrunch my face and quote-tweet Sarah.

> Marie would slip some radium in their coffee. Also, she would consider reporting this to her institution's Office of Research Integrity, making sure to document every step of the process 🖤

I hit send, drum my fingers on the armrest, and wait. My answers are not the main attraction of the account, not in the least. The real reason people reach out to WWMD is . . .

Yep. This. I feel my grin widen as the replies start coming in.

> @DrAllixx This happened to me, too. I was the only woman and only POC in the author lineup and my name suddenly disappeared during revisions. DM if u want to chat, Sarah.

> @AmyBernard I am a member of the Women in Science association, and we have advice for situations like this on our website (they're sadly common)!

> @TheGeologician Going through the same situation rn @BiologySarah. I did report it to ORI and it's still unfolding but I'm happy to talk if you need to vent.

> @SteveHarrison Dude, breaking news: you're lying to yourself. Your contributions aren't VALUABLE enough to warrant authorship. Your team did you a favor letting you tag along for a while but if you're not smart enough, you're OUT. Not everything is about being a woman, sometimes you're just A LOSER 🤦

It is a truth universally acknowledged that a community of women trying to mind their own business must be in want of a random man's opinion.

I've long learned that engaging with basement-dwelling stemlords who come online looking for a fight is never a good idea—the last thing I want is to provide free entertainment for their fragile egos. If they want to blow off some steam, they can buy a gym membership or play third-person-shooter video games. Like normal people.

I make to hide @SteveHarrison's delightful contribution, but notice that someone has replied to him.

> @Shmacademics Yeah, Marie, sometimes you're just a loser. Steve would know.

I chuckle.

> @WhatWouldMarieDo Aw, Steve. Don't be too hard on yourself.
>
> @Shmacademics He is just a boy, standing in front of a girl, asking her to do twice as much work as he ever did in order to prove that she's worthy of becoming a scientist.
>
> @WhatWouldMarieDo Steve, you old romantic.
>
> @SteveHarrison Fuck you. This ridiculous push for women in STEM is ruining STEM. People should get jobs because they're good NOT BECAUSE THEY HAVE VAGINAS. But now people feel like they have to hire women and they get jobs over men who are MORE

QUALIFIED. This is the end of STEM AND IT'S WRONG.

@WhatWouldMarieDo I can see you're upset about this, Steve.

@Shmacademics There, there.

Steve blocks both of us, and I chuckle again, drawing a curious glance from Rocío. @Shmacademics is another hugely popular account on Academic Twitter, and by far my favorite. He mostly tweets about how he should be writing, makes fun of elitism and ivory-tower academics, and points out bad or biased science. I was initially a bit distrustful of him—his bio says "he/him," and we all know how men on the internet can be. But he and I ended up forming an alliance of sorts. When the stemlords take offense at the sheer idea of women in STEM and start pitchforking in my mentions, he helps me ridicule them a little. I'm not sure when we started direct messaging, when I stopped being afraid that he was secretly a retired Gamergater out to doxx me, or when I began considering him a friend. But a handful of years later, here we are, chatting about half a dozen different things a couple of times a week, without having even exchanged real names. Is it weird, knowing that Shmac had lice three times in second grade but not which time zone he lives in? A bit. But it's also liberating. Plus, having opinions online can be very dangerous. The internet is a sea full of creepy, cybercriminal fish, and if Mark Zuckerberg can cover his laptop webcam with a piece of tape, I reserve the right to keep things painfully anonymous.

The flight attendant offers me a glass of water from a tray. I shake my head, smile, and DM Shmac.

MARIE: I think Steve doesn't want to play with us anymore.

SHMAC: I think Steve wasn't held enough as a tadpole.

MARIE: Lol!

SHMAC: How's life?

MARIE: Good! Cool new project starting next week. My ticket away from my gross boss.

SHMAC: Can't believe dude's still around.

MARIE: The power of connections. And inertia. What about you?

SHMAC: Work's interesting.

MARIE: Good interesting?

SHMAC: Politicky interesting. So, no.

MARIE: I'm afraid to ask. How's the rest?

SHMAC: Weird.

MARIE: Did your cat poop in your shoe again?

SHMAC: No, but I did find a tomato in my boot the other day.

MARIE: Send pics next time! What's going on?

SHMAC: Nothing, really.

MARIE: Oh, come on!

SHMAC: How do you even know something's going on?

MARIE: Your lack of exclamation points!

SHMAC: !!!!!!!11!!1!!!!!

MARIE: Shmac.

SHMAC: FYI, I'm sighing deeply.

MARIE: I bet. Tell me!

SHMAC: It's a girl.

MARIE: Ooooh! Tell me EVERYTHING!!!!!!!11!!1!!!!!

SHMAC: There isn't much to tell.

MARIE: Did you just meet her?

SHMAC: No. She's someone I've known for a long time, and now she's back.

SHMAC: And she is married.

MARIE: To you?

SHMAC: Depressingly, no.

SHMAC: Sorry—we're restructuring the lab. Gotta go before someone destroys a 5 mil piece of equipment. Talk later.

MARIE: Sure, but I'll want to know everything about your affair with a married woman.

SHMAC: I wish.

It's nice to know that Shmac is always a click away, especially now that I'm flying into The Wardass's frosty, unwelcoming lap.

I switch to my email app to check if Levi has finally answered the email I sent three days ago. It was just a couple of lines—*Hey, long time no see, I look forward to working together again, would you like to meet to discuss BLINK this weekend?*—but he must have been too busy to reply. Or too full of contempt. Or both.

Ugh.

I lean back against the headrest and close my eyes, wondering how Dr. Curie would deal with Levi Ward. She'd probably hide some radioactive isotopes in his pockets, grab popcorn, and watch nuclear decay work its magic.

Yep, sounds about right.

After a few minutes, I fall asleep. I dream that Levi is part armadillo: his skin glows a faint, sallow green, and he's digging a tomato out of his boot with an expensive piece of equipment. Even with all of that, the weirdest thing about him is that he's finally being nice to me.

• • •

WE'RE PUT UP in small furnished apartments in a lodging facility just outside the Johnson Space Center, only a couple of minutes from the Sullivan Discovery Building, where we'll be working. I can't believe how short my commute is going to be.

"Bet you'll still manage to be late all the time," Rocío tells me, and I glare at her while unlocking my door. It's not my fault if I've spent a sizable chunk of my formative years in Italy, where time is but a polite suggestion.

The place is considerably nicer than the apartment I rent—maybe because of the raccoon incident, probably because I buy 90 percent of my furniture from the as-is bargain corner at IKEA. It has a balcony, a dishwasher, and—huge improvement in my quality of life—a toilet that flushes 100 percent of the times I push the lever. Truly paradigm shifting. I excitedly open and close every single cupboard (they're all empty; I'm not

sure what I expected), take pictures to send Reike and my coworkers, stick my favorite Marie Curie magnet to the fridge (a picture of her holding a beaker that says "I'm pretty rad"), hang my hummingbird feeder on the balcony, and then . . .

It's still only two thirty p.m. Ugh.

Not that I'm one of those people who hates having free time. I could easily spend five solid hours napping, rewatching an entire season of *The Office* while eating Twizzlers, or moving to Step 2 of the Couch-to-5K plan I'm still very . . . okay, *sort of* committed to. But I am here! In Houston! Near the Space Center! About to start the coolest project of my life!

It's Friday, and I'm not due to check in until Monday, but I'm brimming with nervous energy. So I text Rocío to ask whether she wants to check out the Space Center with me (No.) or grab dinner together (I only eat animal carcasses.).

She's so mean. I love her.

My first impression of Houston is: big. Closely followed by: humid, and then by: humidly big. In Maryland, remnants of snow still cling to the ground, but the Space Center is already lush and green, a mix of open spaces and large buildings and old NASA aircraft on display. There are families visiting, which makes it seem a little like an amusement park. I can't believe I'm going to be seeing rockets on my way to work for the next three months. It sure beats the perv crossing guard who works on the NIH campus.

The Discovery Building is on the outskirts of the center. It's wide, futuristic, and three-storied, with glass walls and a complicated-looking stair system I can't quite figure out. I step inside the marble hall, wondering if my new office will have a window. I'm not used to natural light; the sudden intake of vitamin D might kill me.

"I'm Bee Königswasser." I smile at the receptionist. "I'm starting work here on Monday, and I was wondering if I could take a look around?"

He gives me an apologetic smile. "I can't let you in if you don't have an ID badge. The engineering labs are upstairs—high-security areas."

Right. Yes. The engineering labs. Levi's labs. He's probably up there, hard at work. Engineering. Labbing. Not answering my emails.

"No problem, that's understandable. I'll just—"

"Dr. Königswasser? Bee?"

I turn around. There is a blond young man behind me. He's non-threateningly handsome, medium height, smiling at me like we're old friends even though he doesn't look familiar. ". . . Hi?"

"I didn't mean to eavesdrop, but I caught your name and . . . I'm Guy. Guy Kowalsky?"

The name clicks immediately. I break into a grin. "Guy! It's so nice to meet you in person." When I was first notified of BLINK, Guy was my point of contact for logistics questions, and he and I emailed back and forth a few times. He's an astronaut—*an actual astronaut!*—working on BLINK while he's grounded. He seemed so familiar with the project, I initially assumed he'd be my co-lead.

He shakes my hand warmly. "I love your work! I've read all your articles—you'll be such an asset to the project."

"Likewise. I can't wait to collaborate."

If I weren't dehydrated from the flight, I'd probably tear up. I cannot believe that this man, this nice, pleasant man who has given me more positive interactions in one minute than Dr. Wardass did in one year, could have been my co-lead. I must have pissed off some god. Zeus? Eros? Must be Poseidon. Shouldn't have peed in the Baltic Sea during my misspent youth.

"Why don't I show you around? You can come in as my guest." He nods to the receptionist and gestures at me to follow him.

"I wouldn't want to take you away from . . . astronauting?"

"I'm between missions. Giving you a tour beats debugging any day." He shrugs, something boyishly charming about him. We'll get along great, I already know it.

"Have you lived in Houston long?" I ask as we step into the elevator.

"About eight years. Came to NASA right out of grad school. Applied for the Astronaut Corps, did the training, then a mission." I do some math in

my head. It would put him in his mid-thirties, older than I initially thought. "The past two or so, I worked on BLINK's precursor. Engineering the structure of the helmet, figuring out the wireless system. But we got to a point where we needed a neurostimulation expert on board." He gives me a warm smile.

"I cannot wait to see what we cook up together." I also cannot wait to find out why Levi was given the lead of this project over someone who has been on it for years. It just seems unfair. To Guy *and* to me.

The elevator doors open, and he points to a quaint-looking café in the corner. "That place over there—amazing sandwiches, worst coffee in the world. You hungry?"

"No, thanks."

"You sure? It's on me. The egg sandwiches are almost as good as the coffee is bad."

"I don't really eat eggs."

"Let me guess, a vegan?"

I nod. I try hard to break the stereotypes that plague my people and not use the word "vegan" in my first three meetings with a new acquaintance, but if they're the ones to mention it, all bets are off.

"I should introduce you to my daughter. She recently announced that she won't eat animal products anymore." He sighs. "Last weekend I poured regular milk in her cereal figuring she wouldn't know the difference. She told me that her legal team will be in touch."

"How old is she?"

"Just turned six."

I laugh. "Good luck with that."

I stopped having meat at seven, when I realized that the delicious *pollo* nuggets my Sicilian grandmother served nearly every day and the cute *galline* grazing about the farm were more . . . connected than I'd originally suspected. Stunning plot twist, I know. Reike wasn't nearly as distraught: when I frantically explained that "pigs have families, too—a mom and a dad and siblings that will miss them," she just nodded thoughtfully and said, "What you're saying is, we should eat the whole family?" I went fully

vegan a couple of years later. Meanwhile, my sister has made it her life's goal to eat enough animal products for two. Together we emit one normal person's carbon footprint.

"The engineering labs are down this hallway," Guy says. The space is an interesting mix of glass and wood, and I can see inside some of the rooms. "A bit cluttered, and most people are off today—we're shuffling around equipment and reorganizing the space. We've got lots of ongoing projects, but BLINK's everyone's favorite child. The other astronauts pop by every once in a while just to ask how much longer it will be until their fancy swag is ready."

I grin. "For real?"

"Yep."

Making fancy swag for astronauts is my literal job description. I can add it to my LinkedIn profile. Not that anyone uses LinkedIn.

"The neuroscience labs—your labs—will be on the right. This way there are—" His phone rings. "Sorry—mind if I take it?"

"Not at all." I smile at his beaver phone case (nature's engineer) and look away.

I wonder whether Guy would think I'm lame if I snapped a few pictures of the building for my friends. I decide that I can live with that, but when I take out my phone I hear a noise from down the hallway. It's soft and chirpy, and sounds a lot like a . . .

"Meow."

I glance back at Guy. He's busy explaining how to put on *Moana* to someone very young, so I decide to investigate. Most of the rooms are deserted, labs full of large, abstruse equipment that looks like it belongs to . . . well. NASA. I hear male voices somewhere in the building, but no sign of the—

"Meow."

I turn around. A few feet away, staring at me with a curious expression, is a beautiful young calico.

"And who might you be?" I slowly hold out my hand. The kitten comes closer, delicately sniffs my fingers, and gives me a welcoming headbutt.

I laugh. “You’re such a sweet girl.” I squat down to scratch her under her chin. She nips my finger, a playful love bite. “Aren’t you the most *purr*-fect little baby? I feel so *fur*-tunate to have met you.”

She gives me a disdainful look and turns away. I think she understands puns.

“Come on, I was just *kitten*.” Another outraged glare. Then she jumps on a nearby cart, piled ceiling-high with boxes and heavy, precarious-looking equipment. “Where are you going?”

I squint, trying to figure out where she disappeared to, and that’s when I realize it. The equipment? The precarious-looking equipment? It actually *is* precarious. And the cat poked it just enough to dislodge it. And it’s falling on my head.

Right.

About.

Now.

I have less than three seconds to move away. Which is too bad, because my entire body is suddenly made of stone, unresponsive to my brain’s commands. I stand there, terrified, paralyzed, and close my eyes as a jumbled chaos of thoughts twists through my head. *Is the cat okay? Am I going to die? Oh God, I* am *going to die. Squashed by a tungsten anvil like Wile E. Coyote. I am a twenty-first-century Pierre Curie, about to get my skull crushed by a horse-drawn cart. Except that I have no chair in the physics department of the University of Paris to leave to my lovely spouse, Marie. Except that I have barely done a tenth of all the science I meant to do. Except that I wanted so many things and I never oh my God any second now—*

Something slams into my body, shoving me aside and into the wall.

Everything is pain.

For a couple of seconds. Then the pain is over, and everything is *noise*: metal clanking as it plunges to the floor, horrified screaming, a shrill “Meow” somewhere in the distance, and closer to my ear . . . someone is panting. Less than an inch from me.

I open my eyes, gasping for breath, and . . .

Green.

All I can see is green. Not dark, like the grass outside; not dull, like the pistachios I had on the plane. This green is light, piercing, intense. Familiar, but hard to place, not unlike—

Eyes. I'm looking up into the greenest eyes I've ever seen. Eyes that I've seen before. Eyes surrounded by wavy black hair and a face that's angles and sharp edges and full lips, a face that's offensively, imperfectly handsome. A face attached to a large, solid body—a body that is pinning me to the wall, a body made of a broad chest and two thighs that could moonlight as redwoods. Easily. One is slotted between my legs and it's holding me up. Unyielding. This man even *smells* like a forest—and *that mouth*. That mouth is still breathing heavily on top of me, probably from the effort of whisking me out from under seven hundred pounds of mechanical engineering tools, and—

I *know* that mouth.

Levi.

Levi.

I haven't seen Levi Ward in six years. Six blessed, blissful years. And now here he is, pushing me into a wall in the middle of NASA's Space Center, and he looks . . . he looks . . .

"Levi!" someone yells. The clanking goes silent. What was meant to fall has settled on the floor. "Are you okay?"

Levi doesn't move, nor does he look away. His mouth works, and so does his throat. His lips part to say something, but no sound comes out. Instead, a hand, at once rushed and gentle, reaches up to cup my face. It's so large, I feel perfectly cradled. Engulfed in green, cozy warmth. I whimper when it leaves my skin, a plaintive, involuntary sound from deep in my throat, but I stop when I realize that it's only shifting to the back of my skull. To the hollow of my collarbone. To my brow, pushing back my hair.

It's a cautious touch. Pressing but delicate. Lingering but urgent. As though he is studying me. Trying to make sure that I'm all in one piece. Memorizing me.

I lift my eyes, and for the first time I notice the deep, unmasked concern in Levi's eyes.

His lips move, and I think that maybe—is he mouthing my name? Once, and then again? Like it's some kind of prayer?

"Levi? Levi, is she—"

My eyelids fall closed, and everything goes dark.

3

ANGULAR GYRUS: PAY ATTENTION

ON WEEKDAYS, I usually set my alarm for seven a.m.—and then find myself snoozing it anywhere from three ("Raving success") to eight times ("I hope a swarm of rabid locusts attacks me on my way to work, thus allowing me to find solace in the cold embrace of death"). On Monday, however, the unprecedented happens: I'm up at five forty-five, bright-eyed and bushy-tailed. I spit out my night retainer, run into the bathroom, and don't even wait for the water to warm up to step under the shower.

I am *that* eager.

As I pour almond milk on my oatmeal, I give rad Dr. Curie the finger guns. "BLINK's starting today," I tell the magnet. "Send good vibes. Hold the radiations."

I can't remember the last time I've been this excited. Probably because I've never been part of anything this exciting. I stand in front of my closet to pick out an outfit and focus on that—the sheer *excitement*—to avoid thinking about what happened on Friday.

To be fair, there isn't much to think about. I only remember up until the moment I fainted. Yes, I swooned in His Wardness's manly arms like a twentieth-century hysteric with penis envy.

It's nothing new, really. I faint all the time: when I haven't eaten in a while; when I see pictures of large, hairy spiders; when I stand up too quickly from a sitting position. My body's puzzling inability to maintain minimal blood pressure in the face of normal everyday events makes me, as Reike likes to say, a syncope aficionado. Doctors are puzzled but ultimately unconcerned. I've long learned to dust myself off as soon as I regain consciousness and go about my business.

Friday, though, was different. I came to in a few moments—cat nowhere in sight—but my neurons must have still been misfiring because I hallucinated something that could *never* happen: Levi Ward bridal-carrying me to the lobby and gently laying me on one of the couches. Then I must have hallucinated some more: Levi Ward viciously tearing a new one into the engineer who'd left the cart unattended. That had to have been a fever dream, for several reasons.

First of all, Levi is terrifying, but not *that* terrifying. His brand is more kill-'em-with-icy-cold-indifference-and-silent-contempt than angry outbursts. Unless in our time apart he's embraced a whole new level of terrifying, in which case . . . lovely.

Second, it's difficult, and by "difficult" I mean impossible, to imagine him siding against a non-me party in any me-involved accident. Yes, he did save my life, but there's a good chance he had no idea who I even was when he shoved me against the wall. This is Dr. Wardass, after all. The man who once stood for a two-hour meeting rather than take the last empty seat because it was next to me. The man who exited a game of poker he was winning because someone dealt me in. The man who hugged everyone in the lab on his last day at Pitt, and promptly switched to handshakes when it was my turn. If he caught someone stabbing me, he'd probably blame me for walking into the knife—and then take out his whetstone.

Clearly, my brain wasn't at her best on Friday. And I could stand here, stare at my closet, and agonize over the fact that my grad school nemesis saved my life. Or I could bask in my excitement and pick an outfit.

I opt for black skinny jeans and a polka-dotted red top. I pull up my hair in braids that would make a Dutch milkmaid proud, put on red lipstick, and

keep the jewelry to a relative minimum—the usual earrings, my favorite septum piercing, and my maternal grandmother's ring on my left hand.

It's a bit weird to wear someone else's wedding ring, but it's the only memento I have of my nonna, and I like to put it on when I need some good luck. Reike and I moved to Messina to be with her right after our parents died. We ended up having to move again just three years later when she passed, but out of all the short-lived homes, out of all the extended relatives, Nonna is the one who loved us the most. So Reike wears her engagement ring, and I wear her wedding band. Even-steven. I shoot a quick, uplifting tweet from my WWMD account (Happy Monday! KEEP CALM AND CURIE ON, FRIENDS) and head out.

"You excited?" I ask Rocío when I pick her up.

She stares at me darkly and says, "In France, the guillotine was used as recently as 1977." I take it as an invitation to shut up, and I do, smiling like an idiot. I'm still smiling when we get our NASA ID pictures taken and when we later meet up with Guy for a formal tour. It's a smile fueled by positive energy and hope. A smile that says, "I'm going to rock this project" and "Watch me stimulate your brain" and "I'm going to make neuroscience my bitch."

A smile that falters when Guy swipes his badge to unlock yet another empty room.

"And here's where the transcranial magnetic stimulation device will be," he says—just another variation of the same sentence I've heard over. And over. And *over*.

"Here is where the electroencephalography lab will be."

"Here you'll do participant intake once the Review Board approves the project."

"Here will be the testing room you asked for."

Just a lot of rooms that will be, but aren't yet. Even though communications between NASA and NIH indicated that everything needed to carry out the study would be here when I started.

I try to keep on smiling. It's hopefully just a delay. Besides, when Dr. Curie was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1903, she didn't even have a proper

lab, and did all of her research out of a converted shed. *Science*, I tell myself in my inner Jeff Goldblum voice, *finds a way.*

Then Guy opens the last room and says, "And here's the office you two will share. Your computer should arrive soon." That is when my smile turns into a frown.

It's nice, the office. Large and bright, with refreshingly not-rusted-through desks and chairs that will provide just the right amount of lumbar support. And yet.

First of all, it's as distant from the engineering labs as possible. I'm not kidding: if someone grabbed a protractor and solved for x (i.e., the point that's farthest from Levi's office), they'd find that x = my desk. So much for interdisciplinary workspaces and collaborative layouts. But that's almost secondary, because . . .

"Did you say *computer*? Singular?" Rocío looks horrified. "Like . . . one?"

Guy nods. "The one you put on your list."

"We need, like, *ten* computers for the type of data processing we do," she points out. "We're talking multivariate statistics. Independent component analysis. Multidimensional scaling and recursive partitioning. Six sigma—"

"So you need more?"

"At the very least, buy us an abacus."

Guy blinks, confused. ". . . A what?"

"We put five computers on our list," I interject with a side look at Rocío. "We will need *all* of them."

"Okay." He nods, taking out his phone. "I'll make a note to tell Levi. We're heading to meet him right now. Follow me."

My heartbeat accelerates—probably because the last time I saw Levi my brain confabulated that he was carrying me *An Officer and a Gentleman*–style, and the previous came on the tail of a year of him treating me like I'm a tax auditor. I'm nervously playing with my grandmother's ring and wondering what disaster of galactic proportions this next meeting has in store for me, when something catches my eye through the glass wall.

Guy notices. “Want a sneak peek at the helmet prototype?” he asks.

My eyes widen. “Is that what’s in there?”

He nods and smiles. “Just the shell for now, but I can show you.”

“That would be amazing,” I gasp. Embarrassing, how breathless I sound when I get excited. I need to follow through with my Couch-to-5K plans.

The lab is much larger than I expected—dozens of benches, machines I’ve never seen before pressed against the wall, and several researchers at various stations. I feel a frisson of resentment—how come *Levi’s* lab, unlike *mine*, is fully stocked?—but it quiets down the instant I see it.

It.

BLINK is a complex, delicate, high-stakes project, but its mission is straightforward enough: to use what is known about magnetic stimulation of the brain (my jam) to engineer special helmets (Levi’s expertise) that will reduce the “attentional blinks” of astronauts—those little lapses in awareness that are unavoidable when many things happen at once. It’s the culmination of decades of gathering knowledge, of engineers perfecting wireless stimulation technology on one side and neuroscientists mapping the brain on the other. Now, here we are.

Neuroscience and engineering, sitting in a very expensive tree called BLINK, K-I-S-S-I-N-G.

It’s hard to communicate how groundbreaking this is—two separate slices of abstract research bridging the gap between academia and the real world. For any scientist, the prospect would be exhilarating. For me, after the mild shitshow my career has put up in the past couple of years, it’s a dream come true.

All the more now that I’m standing in front of tangible proof of said dream’s existence.

“That’s the . . . ?”

“Yep.”

Rocío murmurs, “Wow,” and for once doesn’t even sound like a sullen Lovecraftian teenager. I’d tease her about it, but I can’t focus on anything but the helmet prototype. Guy is saying something about design and stage of development, but I tune him out and step closer. I knew that it’d be made

from a combination of Kevlar and carbon fiber cloth, that the visor would carry thermal and eye-tracking capabilities, that the structure would be streamlined to host new functionalities. What I did not know was how stunning it would look. A breathtaking piece of hardware, designed to house the software I've been hired to create.

It's beautiful. It's sleek. It's . . .

Wrong.

It's all wrong.

I frown, peering closer at the pattern of holes in the inner shell. "Are these for the neurostimulation output?"

The engineer working at the helmet station gives me a confused look. "This is Dr. Königswasser, Lamar," Guy explains. "The neuroscientist from NIH."

"The one who fainted?"

I knew this would haunt me, because it always does. My nickname in high school was Smelling Salts Bee. Damn my useless autonomic nervous system. "The one and only." I smile. "Is this the final placement for the output holes?"

"Should be. Why?"

I lean closer. "It won't work." A brief silence follows, and I study the rest of the grid.

"Why do you say that?" Guy asks.

"They're too close—the holes, I mean. It looks like you used the International 10–20 system, which is great to record brain data, but for neurostimulation . . ." I bite into my lip. "Here, for instance. This area will stimulate the angular gyrus, right?"

"Maybe? Let me just check. . . ." Lamar scrambles to look at a chart, but I don't need confirmation. The brain is the one place where I never get lost. "Upper part—stimulation at the right frequency will get you increased awareness. Which is exactly what we want, right? But stimulation of the lower part can cause hallucinations. People experiencing a shadow following them, feeling as though they're in two places at the same time, stuff like that. Think of the consequences if someone was in space while

that happened." I tap the inner shell with my fingernail. "The outputs will need to be farther apart."

"But . . ." Lamar sounds severely distressed. "This is Dr. Ward's design."

"Yeah, I'm pretty sure Dr. Ward knows nothing about the angular gyrus," I murmur distractedly.

The ensuing silence should probably tip me off. At least, I should notice the sudden shift in the atmosphere of the lab. But I don't and keep staring at the helmet, writing possible modifications and workarounds in my head, until a throat clears somewhere in the back of the room. That's when I lift my eyes and see him.

Levi.

Standing in the entrance.

Staring at me.

Just staring at me. A tall, stern, snow-tipped mountain. With his expression—the one from years ago, silent and unsmiling. A veritable Mount Fuji of disdain.

Shit.

My cheeks burn. Of course. But *of course*, he just caught me trash-talking his neuroanatomy skills in front of his team like a total asshole. This is my life, after all: a flaming ball of scorching, untimely awkwardness.

"Boris and I are in the conference room. You ready to meet?" he asks, his voice a deep, severe baritone. My heart thuds. I rack my brain for something to say in response.

Then Guy speaks and I realize that Levi isn't even addressing me. He is, in fact, completely ignoring me and what I just said. "Yep. We were just about to head there. Got sidetracked."

Levi nods once and turns around, a silent but clear order to follow him that everyone seems eager to obey. He was like that in grad school, too. Natural leader. Commanding presence. Someone whose bad side you wouldn't want to be on.

Enter me. A proud resident of his bad side for several years, who just renewed her housing permit with a few simple words.

“Is *that* Dr. Ward?” Rocío whispers as we enter the conference room.

“Yup.”

“Welp. That was *excellent* timing, boss.”

I wince. “What are the chances that he didn’t hear me?”

“I don’t know. What are the chances that his personal hygiene is very poor and he has huge wax balls in his ear canal?”

The room is already crowded. I sigh and take the first empty seat I can find, only to realize that it’s across from Levi. Awkwardness level: nuclear. I’m making better and better choices today. Cheering erupts when someone deposits two large boxes of donuts in the center of the table—NASA employees are clearly as enthused by free food as regular academics. People start calling dibs and elbowing each other, and Guy yells over the chaos, “The one in the corner, with the blue frosting, is vegan.” I shoot him a grateful smile and he winks at me. He’s such a nice guy, my almost-co-leader.

As I wait for the crowd to disperse, I take stock of the room. Levi’s team appears to be WurstFest™ material. The well-known Meatwave. A Dicksplosion in the Testosteroven. The good old Brodeo. Aside from Rocío and I, there’s one single woman, a young blonde currently looking at her phone. My gaze is mesmerized by her perfect beach waves and the pink glitter of her nails. I have to force myself to look away.

Eh. WurstFest™ is bad, but it’s at least a small step up from Cockcluster™, which is what Annie and I called academic meetings with only one woman in the room. I’ve been in Cockcluster™ situations countless times in grad school, and they range from unpleasantly isolating to wildly terrifying. Annie and I used to coordinate to attend meetings together—not that hard, since we were symbiotic anyway.

Sadly, none of my male cohort ever got how awful WurstFest™ and Cockcluster™ are for women. “Grad school’s stressful for everyone,” Tim would say when I complained about my entirely male advisory committee. “You keep going on about Marie Curie—she was the only woman in all of science at the time, and she got two Nobel Prizes.”

Of course, Dr. Curie was *not* the only female scientist at the time. Dr. Lise Meitner, Dr. Emmy Noether, Alice Ball, Dr. Nettie Stevens, Henrietta Leavitt, and countless others were active, doing better science with the tip of their little fingers than Tim will ever manage with his sorry ass. But Tim didn't know that. Because, as I now know, Tim was dumb.

"We're ready to start." The balding redheaded man at the head of the table claps his hands, and people scurry to their seats. I lean forward to grab my vegan donut, but my hand freezes in midair.

It's not there anymore. I inspect the box several times, but there's only cinnamon left. Then I lift my eyes and I see it: blue frosting disappearing behind Levi's teeth as he takes a bite. A bite of *my* damn donut. There are dozens of alternatives, but behold: The Wardass chose the one I could eat. What kind of careless, inconsiderate *boob* steals the single available option from a starving, needy vegan?

"I am Dr. Boris Covington," the redhead starts. He looks like an exhausted, disheveled ginger hard-boiled egg. Like he ran here for this meeting, but there are five stacks of paperwork on his desk waiting for him. "I'm in charge of overseeing all research projects here in the Discovery Institute—which makes me your boss." Everyone laughs, with a few good-natured boos. The engineering team seems to be a rowdy bunch. "You guys already know that—with the notable exception of Dr. Königswasser and Ms. Cortoreal, who are here to make sure we don't fail at one of our most ambitious projects yet. Levi's going to be their point of contact, but, everyone, please make them feel welcome." Everyone claps—except for Levi, who is busy finishing his (*my*) donut. What an absolute dingus. "Now let's pretend that I gave an impressive speech and move on to everyone's favorite activity: icebreakers." Almost everyone groans, but I think I'm a fan of Boris. He seems much better than my NIH boss. For instance, he's been speaking for one whole minute and hasn't said anything overtly offensive. "I want your name, job, and . . . let's do favorite movie." More groans. "Hush, children. Levi, you start."

Everyone in the room turns to him, but he takes his sweet time swallowing *my* donut. I stare at his throat, and an odd mix of phantom

sensations hits me. *His thigh pushing between mine. Being pressed into the wall. The woodsy smell at the base of his—*

Wait. *What?*

"Levi Ward, head engineer. And . . ." He licks some sugar off his bottom lip. "*The Empire Strikes Back*."

Oh—are you kidding me? First he steals my donut, and now my favorite movie?

"Kaylee Jackson," the blonde picks up. "I'm project manager for BLINK, and *Legally Blonde.*" She talks a bit like she could be one of Elle Woods's sorority sisters, which makes me like her instinctively. But Rocío tenses beside me. When I glance at her, her brows are furrowed.

Weird.

There are at least thirty people in the room, and the icebreakers get old very soon. I try to pay attention, but Lamar Evans and Mark Costello start fighting over whether *Kill Bill: Vol. 2* is better than *Vol. 1*, and I feel a weird prickle in the center of my forehead.

When I turn, Levi's staring hard at me, his eyes full of that something that I seem to awaken in him. I'm a bit resentful about the donut, not to mention that he still hasn't answered my email, but I remind myself of what Boris just said: he's my main collaborator. So I play nice and give him a cautious, slow-to-unfurl smile that I hope communicates *Sorry about the angular gyrus jab*, and *I hope we'll work well together*, and *Hey, thank you for saving my life!*

He breaks eye contact without smiling back and takes a sip of his coffee. God, I hate him so—

"Bee." Rocío elbows me. "It's your turn."

"Oh, um, right. Sorry. Bee Königswasser, head of neuroscience. And . . ." I hesitate. "*Empire Strikes Back.*" With the corner of my eye I see Levi's fist clench on the table. Crap. I should have just said *Avatar*.

Once the meeting is over, Kaylee comes to speak to Rocío. "Ms. Cortoreal. May I call you Rocío? I need your signature on this document." She smiles sweetly and holds out a pen, which Rocío doesn't accept.

Instead she freezes, staring at Kaylee with her mouth open for several seconds. I have to elbow her in the ribs to get her to defrost. Interesting.

"You're left-handed," Kaylee says while Rocío signs. "Me too. Lefties power, right?"

Rocío doesn't look up. "Left-handed people are more prone to migraines, allergies, sleep deprivation, alcoholism, and on average live three years less than right-handed people."

"Oh." Kaylee's eyes widen. "I, um, didn't . . ."

I'd love to stay and witness more prime Valley Girl and Goth interaction, but Levi's stepping out of the room. As much as I loathe the idea, we'll need to talk at some point, so I run after him. When I reach him, I'm pitifully out of breath. "Levi, wait up!"

I might be reading too much into the way his spine goes rigid, but something about how he stops reminds me of an inmate getting caught by the guards just a step away from breaking out of prison. He turns around slowly, hulking but surprisingly graceful, all black and green and that strange, intense face.

It was actually a thing, back in grad school. Something to debate while waiting for participants to show up and analyses to run: *Is Levi actually handsome? Or is he just six four and built like the Colossus of Rhodes?* There were plenty of opinions going around. Annie, for instance, was very much in camp "Ten out of ten, would have a torrid affair with." And I'd tell her *Ew, yikes*, and laugh, and call her a traitor. Which . . . yeah. Turned out to be accurate, but for completely different reasons.

In hindsight, I'm not sure why I used to be so shocked about his fan club. It's not so outlandish that a serious, taciturn man who has several *Nature Neuroscience* publications and looks like he could bench-press the entire faculty body in either hand would be considered attractive.

Not that I ever did. Or ever will.

In fact, I'm absolutely *not* thinking again about his thigh pushing between my legs.

"Hey." I smile tentatively. He doesn't answer, so I continue, "Thank you for the other day." Still no answer. So I continue some more. "I wasn't, you

know . . . standing in front of that cart for shits and giggles." I need to stop twisting my grandmother's ring. Stat. "There was a cat, so—"

"A cat?"

"Yeah. A calico. A kitten. Mostly white, with orange and black spots on the ears. She had the cutest little . . ." I notice his skeptical look. "For real. There was a cat."

"*Inside* the building?"

"Yes." I frown. "She jumped on the cart. Made the boxes fall."

He nods, clearly unconvinced. Fantastic—now he thinks I'm making up the cat.

Wait. *Am* I making up the cat? Did I hallucinate it? Did I—

"Can I help you with anything?"

"Oh." I scratch the back of my head. "No. I just wanted to, ah, tell you how excited I am to collaborate again." He doesn't immediately reply, and a terrible thought occurs to me: Levi doesn't remember me. He has no idea who I am. "Um, we used to be in the same lab at Pitt. I was a first-year when you graduated. We didn't overlap long, but . . ."

His jaw tenses, then immediately relaxes. "I remember," he says.

"Oh, good." It's a relief. My grad school archnemesis forgetting about me would be a bit humiliating. "I thought you might not, so—"

"I have a functioning hippocampus." He looks away and adds, a little gruffly, "I thought you'd be at Vanderbilt. With Schreiber."

I'm surprised he knows about that. When I made plans to go work in Schreiber's lab, the best of the best in my field, Levi had long moved on from Pitt. The point is, of course, moot, because after all the happenings of two years ago happened, I ended up scrambling to find another position. But I don't like to think about that time. So I say, "Nope," keeping my tone neutral to avoid baring my throat to the hyena. "I'm at NIH. Under Trevor Slate. But he's great, too." He really isn't. And not just because he enjoys reminding me that women have smaller brains than men.

"How's Tim?"

Now—*that*'s a mean question. I know for a fact that Tim and Levi have ongoing collaborations. They even hosted a panel together at the main

conference in our field last year, which means that Levi knows that Tim and I called off our wedding. Plus, he must be aware of what Tim did to me. For the simple reason that everyone knows what Tim did to me. Lab mates, faculty members, janitors, the lady who manned the sandwich station in the Pitt cafeteria—they *all* knew. Long before I did.

I make myself smile. "Good. He's good." I doubt it's a lie. People like Tim always land on their feet, after all. Unlike people like me, who fall on their metaphorical asses, break their tailbones, and spend years paying off the medical bills. "Hey, what I said earlier, about the angular gyrus . . . I didn't mean to be rude. I wasn't thinking."

"It's okay."

"I hope you're not mad. I didn't mean to overstep."

"I'm not mad."

I stare up at his face. He doesn't seem mad. Then again, he also doesn't seem not mad. He just seems like the old Levi: quietly intense, unreadable, not at all fond of me.

"Good. Great." My eyes fall to his large bicep, and then to his fist. He is clenching it again. Guess Dr. Wardass still dislikes me. Whatever. His problem. Maybe I have a bad aura. It doesn't matter—I'm here to get a job done, and I will. I square my shoulders. "Guy gave me a tour earlier. I noticed that none of our equipment's here yet. What's the ETA for that?"

His lips press together. "We are working on it. I'll keep you posted."

"Okay. My RA and I can't get anything done until our computers arrive, so the earlier the better."

"I'll keep you posted," he repeats tersely.

"Cool. When can we meet to discuss BLINK?"

"Email me with times that work for you."

"They all do. I don't have a schedule until my equipment arrives, so—"

"Please, email me." His tone, patient and firm, screams *I'm an adult dealing with a difficult child*, so I don't insist further.

"Okay. Will do." I nod, half-heartedly wave my goodbye, and turn to walk away.

I can't wait to work with this guy for three months. I love being treated like I'm a piece of belly button lint instead of a valuable asset to a team. That's why I got a Ph.D. in neuroscience: to achieve nuisance status and be patronized by the Wardasses of the world. Lucky me for—

"There's one more thing," he says. I turn back and tilt my head. His expression is as closed off as usual, and—why the hell is the feel of his thigh in my brain again? *Not now, intrusive thoughts*.

"The Discovery Building has a dress code."

His words don't land immediately. Then they do, and I look down to my clothes. He can't possibly mean me, can he? I'm wearing jeans and a blouse. *He* is wearing jeans and a Houston Marathon T-shirt. (God, he's probably one of those obnoxious people who post their workout stats on social media.)

"Yes?" I prompt him, hoping he'll explain himself.

"Piercings, certain hair colors, certain . . . types of makeup are unacceptable." I see his eyes fall on one of the braids draped over my shoulder and then drift upward to a spot above my head. As though he can't bear to look at me longer than a split second. As though my sight, my *existence*, offends him. "I'll make sure Kaylee sends you the handbook."

". . . Unacceptable?"

"Correct."

"And you're telling me this because . . . ?"

"Please, make sure you follow the dress code."

I want to kick him in the shins. Or maybe punch him. No—what I really want is to grab his chin and force him to stare at what he clearly considers my ugly, offensive face some more. Instead I put my hands on my hips and smile. "That's interesting." I keep my tone pleasant enough. Because I am a pleasant person, dammit. "Because half of your team are wearing sweats or shorts, have visible tattoos, and Aaron, I believe is his name, has a gauge in his ear. It makes me wonder if maybe there's a gendered double standard at play here."

He closes his eyes, as though trying to collect himself. As though staving off a wave of anger. Anger at *what*? My piercings? My hair? My

corporeal form? “Just make sure you follow the dress code.”

I cannot believe this chucklefuck. “Are you serious?”

He nods. All of a sudden I am too mad to be in his presence. “Very well. I’ll make an effort to look *acceptable* from now on.”

I whirl around and walk back to the conference room. If my shoulder brushes his torso on my way there, I am too busy not kneeing him in the nuts to apologize.

4

PARAHIPPOCAMPAL GYRUS: SUSPICION

MY SECOND DAY on BLINK is almost as good as my first.

"What do you mean, we can't get inside our office?"

"I told you. Someone dug a moat around it and filled it with alligators. And bears. And carnivorous moths." I stare silently at Rocío and she sighs, swiping her ID through the reader by the door. It blinks red and makes a flat noise. "Our badges don't work."

I roll my eyes. "I'll go find Kaylee. She can probably fix this."

"No!"

She sounds so uncharacteristically panicked, I lift an eyebrow. "No?"

"Don't call Kaylee. Let's just . . . knock the door down. Count of three? One, two—"

"Why shouldn't I call Kaylee?"

"Because." Her throat bobs. "I don't like her. She's a witch. She might curse our families. All our firstborns shall have ingrown toenails, for centuries to come."

"I thought you didn't want kids?"

"I don't. I'm worried about you, boss."

I tilt my head. "Ro, is this heat stroke? Should I buy you a hat? Houston's much warmer than Baltimore—"

“Maybe we should just go home. It’s not like our equipment is here. What are we even going to do?”

She’s being *so* weird. Though, to be fair, she’s always weird. “Well, I brought my laptop, so we can— Oh, Guy!”

“Hey. Do you have time to answer a couple of questions for me?”

“Of course. Could you let us into our office? Our badges aren’t working.”

He opens the door and immediately asks me about brain stimulation and spatial cognition, and over an hour goes by. “It might be tricky to get to deep structures, but we can find a work-around,” I tell him toward the end. There’s a piece of paper full of diagrams and stylized brains between us. “As soon as the equipment arrives, I can show you.” I bite the inside of my cheek, hesitant. “Hey, can I ask you something?”

“A date?”

“No, I—”

“Good, because I prefer figs.”

I smile. Guy reminds me a bit of my British cousin—total charmer, adorable smile. “Same. I . . . Is there a reason the neuro equipment isn’t here yet?”

I know Levi is supposed to be my point of contact, but he’s currently sitting on three unanswered emails. I’m not sure how to get him to reply. Use Comic Sans? Write in primary colors?

“Mmm.” Guy bites his lip and looks around. Rocío is coding away on her laptop with AirPods in her ears. “I heard Kaylee say that it’s an authorization problem.”

“Authorization?”

“For the funds to be disbursed and new equipment to be brought in, several people need to sign off.”

I frown. “Who needs to sign off?”

“Well, Boris. His superiors. Levi, of course. Whatever the holdup is, I’m sure he’ll fix it soon.”

Levi is as likely to be the holdup as I am to make a mistake while filing my taxes (i.e., very), but I don’t point that out. “Have you known him long?

Levi, I mean."

"Years. He was very close to Peter. I think that's why Levi threw his name in the hat for BLINK." I want to ask who Peter is, but Guy seems to assume I already know. Is he someone I met yesterday? I'm so bad with names. "He's a fantastic engineer and a great team leader. He was at the Jet Propulsion Lab when I was on my first space mission. I know they were sad to see him transfer."

I frown. This morning I walked past him chatting with the engineers, and they were all laughing at something sportsball he'd just said. I choose to believe that they were just sucking up to him. Okay, he's good at his job, but he can't possibly be a beloved boss, can he? Not Dr. Wardness of the intractable disposition and wintery personality. And since we're talking, why the hell did they decide to transfer someone from the JPL instead of having Guy lead?

Must be divine punishment. I guess I kicked lots of puppies in a past life. Maybe I used to be Dracula.

"Levi's a good guy," Guy continues. "A good bro, too. He owns a truck, helped me move out after my ex kicked me out." *Of course* he does. *Of course* he drives a vehicle with a huge environmental footprint that's probably responsible for the death of twenty seagulls a day. While chomping on *my* vegan donut. "Also, we sometimes babysit playdates together. Having beers and talking about *Battlestar Galactica* vastly improves the experience of watching two six-year-olds arguing over who gets to be Moana."

My jaw drops. *What?* Levi has a *child*? A small, *human* child?

"I wouldn't worry about the equipment, Bee. Levi will take care of it. He's great at getting stuff done." Guy winks at me as he stands. "I can't wait to see what you two geniuses come up with."

Levi will take care of it.

I watch Guy step out and wonder if more ominous words were ever uttered.

• • •

FUN FACT ABOUT me: I am a fairly mellow person, but I happen to have a very violent fantasy life.

Maybe it's an overactive amygdala. Maybe it's too much estrogen. Maybe it's the lack of parental role models in my formative years. I honestly don't know what the cause is, but the fact remains: I sometimes daydream about murdering people.

By "sometimes," I mean often.

And by "people," I mean Levi Ward.

I have my first vivid reverie on my third day at NASA, when I imagine offing him with poison. I'd be satisfied with a quick and painless end, as long as I got to proudly stand over his lifeless body, kick it in the ribs, and proclaim, "This is for not answering even one of my seven emails." Then I'd casually stomp on one of his humongous hands and add, "And this is for never being in your office when I tried to corner you there." It's a nice fantasy. It sustains me in my free time, which is . . . plentiful. Because my ability to do my work hinges on my ability to magnetically stimulate brains, which in turn hinges on the arrival of my damn equipment.

By the fourth day, I'm convinced that Levi needs some miracle-blade stabbing. I ambush him in the shared kitchen on the second floor, where he's pouring coffee into a Star Wars mug with a Baby Yoda picture. It says *Yoda Best Engineer* and it's so adorably cute, he doesn't deserve it. I briefly wonder if he bought it himself, or if it's a present from his child. If that's the case, he doesn't deserve the child, either.

"Hey." I smile up at him, leaning my hip against the sink. God, he's so tall. And broad. He's a thousand-year oak. Someone with a body like this has no business owning a nerdy mug. "How are you?"

His head jerks down to look at me, and for a split moment his eyes look panicked. Trapped. It quickly melts into his usual non-expression, but not before his hand slips. Some coffee sloshes over the rim, and he almost gives himself third degree burns.

I'm a cave troll. I'm so unpleasant to be around, I make him clumsy. The sheer power I hold.

"Hi," he says, drying himself with kitchen paper. No *Fine*. No *And you?* No *Boy howdy, the weather's humid today*.

I sigh internally. "Any news about the equipment?"

"We're working on it."

It's amazing how good he is at looking *to* me without actually looking *at* me. If it were an Olympic discipline, he'd have a gold medal and his picture on a Wheaties box.

"Why exactly is it not here yet? Any issues with the NIH funds?"

"Authorizations. But we're—"

"Working on it, yes." I'm still smiling. Murderously polite. The neuroscience on positive reinforcement is solid—it's all about the dopamine. "Whose authorizations are we waiting for?"

His muscles, many and enormous, stiffen. "A couple." His eyes fall on me and then on my thumb, which is twisting around my grandmother's ring. They immediately bounce away.

"Who are we missing? Maybe I can talk to them. See if I can speed up things."

"No."

Right. Of course. "Can I see the blueprints for the prototype? Make a few notes?"

"They're on the server. You have access."

"Do I? I sent you an email about that, and about—"

A phone rings in his pocket. He checks the caller ID and answers with a soft "Hey" before I can continue. I hear a female voice on the other side. Levi doesn't look at me as he mouths, "Excuse me," and slips out of the kitchen. I'm left alone.

Alone with my stabbing dreams.

On the fifth day, my fantasies evolve yet again. I'm walking to my office, schlepping a refill bottle for the water cooler and half-heartedly considering using it to drown Levi (his hair seems long enough to hold on to while I push his head underwater, but I could also tie an anvil to his neck). Then I hear voices inside and stop to listen.

Okay, fine: to eavesdrop.

“—in Houston?” Rocío is asking.

“Five or six years,” a deep voice answers. Levi’s.

“And how many times have you seen La Llorona?”

A pause. “Is that the woman from the legend?”

“Not a *woman*,” she scoffs. “A tall lady ghost with dark hair. Wronged by a man, she drowned her own children in revenge. Now she dresses in white, like a bride, and weeps on the banks of rivers and streams throughout the south.”

“Because she regrets it?”

“No. She’s trying to lure more children to bodies of water and drown them. She’s amazing. I want to be her.”

Levi’s soft laugh surprises me. And so does his tone, gently teasing. Warm. What the hell? “I’ve never had the, um, pleasure, but I can recommend nearby hiking trails with water. I’ll send you an email.”

What is *happening*? Why is he *conversing*? Like a *normal person*? Not with grunts, or nods, or clipped fragments of words, but in actual sentences? And why is he promising to send *emails*? Does he know how to? And why, why, *why* am I thinking about the way he pinned me against that stupid wall? *Again?*

“That would be great. I normally avoid nature, but I am ready to brave clean air and sunlight for my favorite celebrity.”

“I don’t think she qualifies as a—”

I step into the office and immediately halt, dumbstruck by the most extraordinary sight I have ever laid my eyes upon.

Dr. Levi Ward. Is. Smiling.

Apparently, The Wardass can smile. At people. He possesses the necessary facial muscles. Though the second I step inside, his dimpled, boyish grin fades, and his eyes darken. Maybe he can only smile at *some* people? Maybe I’m just not considered “people”?

“Morning, boss.” Rocío waves at me from her desk. “Levi let me in. Our badges still aren’t working.”

“Thanks, Levi. Any idea when they will?”

Icy green. Can green be icy? The one in his eyes sure manages to. "We're working on it." He makes for the door, and I think he's going to leave, but instead he picks up the refill bottle I dragged here, lifts it with one hand—*one! (1)! hand!*—and lodges it on top of the cooler.

"You don't have to—"

"It's no problem," he says. He should be sent to jail for the way his biceps look. At least for a little bit. Also, please lock him up for being gone before I can ask if our equipment will ever arrive, if he'll ever answer my emails, if I'll ever be worthy of a compound sentence made of multiple clauses.

"Boss?"

I slowly turn to Rocío. She's looking at me, inquisitive. "Yep?"

"I don't think Levi likes you very much."

I sigh. I shouldn't be involving Rocío in this weird feud of ours—partly because it seems unprofessional, partly because I'm not sure what she'll blurt out at the most inappropriate moment. On the other hand, there's no point in denying the obvious. "We know each other from before. Levi and I."

"Before you publicly announced that he's shit at neuroscience, you mean?"

"Yeah."

"I see."

"You do?"

"Of course. You two had a passionate love story that slowly soured, culminating when you caught Levi in an intimate embrace with your butler, stabbed his abdomen sixty-nine times, and left him for dead—only to be astonished to find him still alive when you arrived in Houston."

I cock my head. "Do you really think two scientists could afford a butler?"

She mulls it over. "Okay, that part's unrealistic."

"Levi and I were in grad school together. And we . . ." I honestly have no idea how to put it diplomatically. I want to say "didn't get along," but

there was never an along to be gotten. We never interacted, because he discouraged it or avoided it. “He was never a fan.”

She nods like she finds the idea relatable. That little scorpion. I love her. “Did he hate you at first sight, or did he grow into it?”

“Oh, he—” I stop short.

I actually have no idea. I try to think back to my first meeting with him, but I can’t remember it. It must have been on my first day of grad school, when Tim and I joined Sam’s lab, but I have no memories. He was vaguely hostile to me well before the incident in Sam’s office, when he declined to collaborate, but I can’t place the start of it. Interesting. I guess Tim or Annie might know. Except that I’d rather slowly perish from cobalt poisoning than ever speak to either of them again.

“I’m not sure.” I shrug. “A combination?”

“Is Levi’s dislike related to the fact that I just spent a week on TikTok because I don’t have a decent computer to work on?”

I plop down in my chair. I suspect the two things are very related, but it’s not as if I can prove it, or know what to do about it. It’s an isolating situation. I’ve considered talking to other people here at NASA, or even at NIH, but they’d just point out that Levi needs me to make the project succeed, and that the idea of him *self*-sabotaging just to sabotage *me* is preposterous. They might even think that I’m the one who’s in the wrong, since I haven’t proven myself as a project leader yet.

And there’s something else to consider. Something that I don’t want to say out loud, or even think in my head, but here goes: if my career is a sapling, Levi’s is a baobab. It can withstand a lot more. He has a history of completed grants and successful collaborations. BLINK’s failure would be a bump in the road for him, and a car-totaling crash for me.

Am I being paranoid? Probably. I need to lay off the coffee and stop spending my nights plotting Levi’s demise. He’s living rent free in my head. Meanwhile, he doesn’t even know my last name.

“I don’t know, Ro.” I sigh. “They might be related? Or not?”

“Hmm.” She rocks back in her chair. “I wonder if pointing out that his revenge plan is harming not just *your* career prospects but an innocent

bystander's, too, would help. The innocent bystander is me, by the way."

I bite back a smile. "Thank you for clarifying."

"You know what you should do?"

"Please don't say 'stab his abdomen sixty-nine times.' "

"I wasn't going to. That's too good advice to waste on you. No, you should ask @WhatWouldMarieDo. On Twitter. You know her?"

I freeze. My cheeks warm. I study Rocío's expression, but it looks as sullenly bored as usual. I briefly consider saying "Never heard of her," but it seems like overcompensating. "Yeah."

"I figured, since you're a Marie Curie stan. You own, like, three pairs of Marie Curie socks." I own seven but I just hum, noncommittal. "You can tweet at Marie with your problem. She'll retweet and you'll get advice. I ask all the time."

Does she? "Really? From your professional Twitter?"

"Nah, I make burner accounts. I don't want other people knowing my private business."

"Why?"

"I complain a lot. About you, for instance."

I try not to smile. It's very hard. "What did I do?"

"The vegan Lean Cuisine you always eat at your desk?"

"Yeah?"

"It smells like farts."

That night I drag a chair out on the balcony and stare at my depressingly deserted hummingbird feeder, trying to formulate a question as vaguely as possible.

> @WhatWouldMarieDo . . . if she suspected that a collaborator has a vendetta against her and is sabotaging their shared project?

When put into words it feels so stupid, I can't even hit send. Instead, I google whether I'm within the age of onset for paranoid ideation—shit, I

am—and call Reike to update her on current events.

"What do you mean, you almost *died*? Did you see your life replay before your eyes? Did you think of me? Of the cats you never adopted? Of the love you never allow yourself to give? Did you un-fence the Bee-fence?"

I'm not sure why I persevere with telling my sister every little humiliating thing that happens to me. My life is mortifying enough without her ruthless commentary. "I didn't think about anything."

"You thought of Marie Curie, didn't you?" Reike laughs. "Weirdo. How did The Wardass manage to save you? Where did he come from?"

That's actually a good question. I have no idea how he was able to intervene so quickly. "Right place, right time kind of thing, probably."

"And now you *owe* him. Your archnemesis. This is delightful."

"You're enjoying this way too much."

"Beetch, I spent the day teaching the German dative for thirty euros. I deserve this."

I sigh. My hummingbird feeder is still despondently empty, and my heart squeezes. I miss Finneas. I miss the tchotchkes I accumulated in my Bethesda apartment that made it feel like home. I miss Reike—seeing her in person, hugging her, being in the same time zone. I miss knowing where the olives are at the supermarket. I miss doing science. I miss the elation I felt during my three days of celebration when I thought BLINK would be the opportunity of a lifetime. I miss not having to google whether I'm having a psychotic episode.

"Am I crazy? Is Levi really sabotaging me?"

"You're not crazy. If you were, I'd be, too. Genes and stuff." Knowing Reike, I don't find this reassuring. At all. "But as much as he dislikes you, it's hard to believe that he's sabotaging you. That level of hatred requires so much effort and motivation and commitment, it's basically love. I doubt he cares that much. My guess is that he's just being a testicle and not actively helping you. Which is why you should have a calm but firm conversation with him."

I sigh again. "You're probably right."

“Probably?”

I smile. “Likely.”

“Hmm. Tell me about Astronaut Guy. Is Astronaut Guy cute?”

“He’s nice.”

“Aw. Not cute, then?”

When I go to bed, I’m convinced that Reike is right. I need to be firmer in my demands. I have a plan for next week: if there is no ETA for my equipment by Monday morning, I’m going to civilly confront Levi and tell him to cut the crap. If things get ugly, I’ll threaten him with wearing the dress again. It was clearly his kryptonite. I’d be open to doing laundry every night and subjecting him to it for the rest of my stay in Houston.

I smile at the ceiling, thinking that being revolting sometimes has its own advantages. I turn around, and when the sheets rustle, I’m almost in a good mood. Cautiously optimistic. BLINK will work out; I’ll make sure of it.

And then Monday happens.

5

AMYGDALA: ANGER

IT STARTS WITH Trevor, my NIH boss, wanting to talk "as soon as you can, Bee," which has me groaning into my oatmeal.

Neuroscience is a relatively new field, and Trevor is a mediocre scientist who was lucky enough to be at the right place when tons of neuro positions and funding opportunities were created. Fast forward twenty years, and he has made just enough connections to avoid being fired—even though I strongly suspect that if given a human brain, he wouldn't be able to point to the occipital lobe.

I call him while walking to work, the humid morning air instantly pasting a sticky layer on my skin. His first words are: "Bee, where are you with BLINK?"

Oh, I'm just peachy, thank you. What about you? "About to start week two."

"But where's the project at?" He bristles. "Are the suits ready?"

"Helmets. They're helmets." Seems like that would be an easy detail to remember, since we study the brain.

"Whatever," he says impatiently. "Are they ready?"

I miss him *so* little. I can't wait till BLINK makes my CV awesome and I can move to a position that doesn't require acknowledging his existence.

“They’re not. The projected timeline is three months. We haven’t even started.”

A pause. “What do you mean, you haven’t started?”

“I currently have no equipment. No EEG. No TMS. No *computers*, not even access to my office. Everything I asked for in my application, *weeks* ago, has yet to be delivered.”

“What?”

“There are mysterious authorizations that need to be collected. But it’s impossible to figure out *whose* authorizations.”

“Are you *serious*?”

My heart beats faster at the indignation in his voice. Trevor sounds mad—do I have an ally? A horrible ally, but a useful one. If he exerts some pressure at higher levels, they’ll intervene and Levi won’t be able to drag his feet anymore.

Oh my God. Why didn’t I just call Trevor on day one? “I *know*—it’s stupid, a waste of time, and unprofessional. I’m not sure who can help us fix this situation, but—”

“Then you better figure it the hell out. What have *you* been doing there for a week, visiting the space museum? Bee, you’re not on vacation.”

“I—”

“It’s *your* responsibility to get BLINK going. What do you think you were hired for?”

Right. *This* is why I didn’t call Trevor. “I have no power or connections here. My liaison is Levi, and whatever I do is—”

“Clearly, whatever you do is not enough.” He takes a deep breath. “Listen carefully, Bee. George Kramer called me last night.” Kramer is the head of our NIH institute—so far removed from my lowly postdoc position that it takes me a moment to place the name. “On Friday, he talked with the director of NIH and with two members of Congress. The general consensus is that BLINK is the kind of project that taxpayers eat up. It mixes astronauts and brains, which market-test well among average Americans. They’re sexy topics.” I recoil. I can never hear Trevor and his smelly breath use the word “sexy” again. “Plus, it’s the joint collaboration of two already

beloved government agencies. It'll make the current administration look good, and they *need* to look good."

I frown. He has been talking for over a minute and hasn't mentioned science once. "I don't see what this means?"

"It means that as of right now there's a lot of scrutiny over BLINK. Over *your* performance. Kramer wants weekly updates, starting today."

"He wants an update *today*?"

"And every week from today."

Well, this is going to be a problem. What the hell am I supposed to tell him? That I have no progress to report—but will he accept an R-rated list of elaborately intricate murder fantasies I have spun regarding Dr. Levi Ward? I am toying with the idea of turning them into a graphic novel.

"And, Bee," Trevor is saying, "Kramer doesn't care about attempts. He wants *results*."

"Wait a minute. I can give Kramer however many updates he wants. But this is science, not PR. I want results as much as he does, but we're talking about building a piece of equipment that will alter astronauts' brain activity. I'm not going to rush through experiments and make a possibly fatal mistake—"

"Then you're off this project."

My jaw drops. I stop in the middle of the crosswalk—until a Nissan honks and startles me into running to the sidewalk. "What—what did you just say?"

"If you don't get your act together, I'm going to pull you and send someone else."

"Why? *Who?*"

"Hank. Or Jan. Or someone else—you know how long the list is? How many people applied for this position?"

"But that's the point! I got BLINK because I'm the most qualified, you can't just send someone else!"

"I can if you've been there for an entire week and got nothing done. Bee, I don't care if you're the best I have at neurostimulation—if you don't get it together soon, you're out."

By the time I get to the office, my heart is pounding and my head's in chaos. Can Trevor take me off of BLINK? No. He can't. Or maybe he can. I have no clue.

Shit, of course he can. He can do whatever he wants, especially if he can prove that I'm not doing enough. Which he will be able to do, thanks to Levi Wardass. God, I hate him. My murder fantasies reach their final form: longitudinal impalement. Vlad-style. I'll plant the stake right outside my bedroom window. His suffering can be the last thing I see before I sleep and the first when I wake up. I'll sprinkle nectar all over him, so the hummingbirds can feast on his blood. Solid plan.

Rocío asked for the morning off. I'm alone in the office and free to do what my heart desires: head-desk. What are my options here? I need to get a straight answer on when the equipment will be delivered, but I don't know who to ask. Guy will direct me to Levi, Levi won't talk to me, and . . .

I sit up as an idea starts forming in my head. Two minutes later I'm on the phone with StimCase, the company that produces the system I use. "This is Dr. Bee Königswasser, calling from the Sullivan Discovery Institute, NASA. I wanted to check on the status of our order—it's a TMS system."

"Of course." The customer service lady's voice is low and soothing. "Do you have an order number?"

"Um, not at hand. My, um, assistant is out. But the listed principal investigator should be either me or Dr. Levi Ward."

"Just a moment, then. Oh, yes. Under Dr. Ward's name. But it looks like the order was canceled."

My stomach twists in knots. I tighten my fingers around the phone to avoid dropping it. "Could you . . ." I clear my throat. "Could you check again?"

"It was supposed to be shipped last Monday, but Dr. Ward canceled it the previous Friday." The day Levi first saw me in Houston. The day he saved my life. The day he decided that he had no intention of working with me, ever.

“I . . . Okay.” I nod, even though she can’t possibly see me. “Thank you.” The hang-up noise is deafeningly loud, echoing through my head for long moments.

I don’t know what to do. What do I do? Shit. *Shit*. You know who would know what to do? Dr. Curie, of course. But also: Annie. When she was a third year, some guy stole her optic fibers, so she installed a subroutine on his computer that made lobster porn pop-up every time he typed the letter *x*. He almost dropped out of grad school. That night we celebrated by making watermelon sangria and reinventing the Macarena on the roof of her apartment building.

Of course, what Annie knows or *doesn’t* know is irrelevant. She’s not in my life anymore. She’s made her choices. For reasons that I’ll never understand. And I—

“Bee?”

I set my phone on the table, wipe my sweaty palms over my jeans, and look to the door. “Hey, Kaylee.” She’s wearing a bright pink lace dress that looks the opposite of what I’m feeling.

“Is Rocío here?”

“She’s out. Taking a test.” I swallow, my mind still reeling from the phone call. Phone *calls*. “Can I help you with anything?”

“No. I just wanted to ask her if . . .” She shrugs uncomfortably, flushes a little, but then quickly adds, “I was surprised you weren’t at the meeting this morning.”

I tilt my head. “What meeting?”

“The one with the astronauts.”

The knots in my stomach tighten. I don’t like where this is going. “The astronauts.”

“Yeah, the one Levi and Guy organized. For feedback. To brainstorm options for the helmets. It was really useful.”

“When . . . when was it scheduled for?”

“This morning. Eight a.m. It was set up last week, and . . .” Kaylee’s eyes widen. “You knew about it, right?”

I look away and shake my head. This is humiliating. And infuriating. And other things, too.

"Oh my God." She sounds genuinely distraught. "I am *so* sorry—I have no idea how that could happen."

I exhale a silent, bitter laugh. "I do."

"Is there anything I can do to fix this? As project manager, I want to apologize!"

"No, I . . ." I paste a smile on my face. "It's not your fault, Kaylee. You've been great." I'm tempted to explain to her that her boss has also been great—a great pain in my ass. But I don't want to put her in an uncomfortable position, and I'm not sure I trust myself not to blurt out a string of insults.

I sit for a long time after she leaves, staring at the empty desks, the empty chairs, the empty white walls of my supposed office, where I am supposed to do the science that will supposedly launch my career and make a happy, fulfilled woman out of me. I sit until my hands are not shaking and my chest doesn't feel like it's being squeezed by a large hand anymore.

Then I stand, take a deep breath, and march straight to Levi's office.

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I KNOCK, BUT I don't bother waiting for a response. I open the door, close it behind me, and start speaking as soon as I'm in, my arms folded on my chest. For reasons I cannot discern, I'm smiling.

"Why?" Levi's gaze lifts from his computer screen to me, and his double take is small, but noticeable. He always has the same look in his eyes when he first sees me: a flash of panic. Then he collects himself and his entire face shutters. He should really work on expanding his emotional range. What does he think I'm going to do, anyway? Convert him to Scientology? Sell him Avon products? Give him full-blown typhoid? "Really, I just want to know why. I'm not even asking you to stop, I just need to know . . . *why*? Do I smell like cilantro? Did I steal your parking spot in grad school? Do I

remind you of the kid who poured Snapple on your Game Boy when you were about to finish *The Legend of Zelda*?"

He blinks at me from his chair and has the audacity to look confused. I have to give it to him, he has giant balls. Likely to compensate for his micro-dick. "What are you talking about?"

My smile turns bitter. "Levi. Please."

"I have no idea what you're referring to. But I'm really busy, so—"

"See, I'm not. I'm not busy *at all*. I haven't been this *un*busy since I was on summer break in middle school—but you know that already, so . . . why?"

He sits back in his chair. Even half-hidden by his desk, his presence is overwhelming. Winter-frosty. Snow-covered spruces, his eyes. "There are things I need to be doing right this moment. Can we schedule a meeting for another time?"

I laugh softly. "Sure. Should I send you an email?"

"That works."

"I bet. Will it get the same number of answers as the other emails I sent you?"

He frowns. "Of course."

"Zero, then."

He frowns harder. "I've answered all your emails."

"Is that so?" I don't believe it for a second. "Then maybe it's an email problem. If I were to check my spam folder I'd find a message from you inviting me to this morning's meeting?"

That's the moment something shifts. The moment Levi realizes that he's going to have to deal with me. He stands, walks around his desk, leans against it. He folds his arms on his chest and regards me calmly for a minute.

Look at us. Just two archnemeses, casually standing in front of each other in fake-relaxed poses while tumbleweeds roll their merry way around us. A modern spaghetti western.

I shoot first. "So, it's all a big email misunderstanding?"

He doesn't answer. Just stares somewhere above my right shoulder.

“It checks out. Emails that *should* be delivered, aren’t. Emails that *shouldn’t*, are. It would explain the one that canceled the order for my TMS equipment. It probably just sent itself. Vigilante emails going rogue. Uh-oh, Outlook’s in trouble.” His fake-calm is getting less convincing. “If you think about it, it’s the only possible explanation. Because last week, when I asked you if you had an ETA, you said that we were *close*. And you would never lie to me, would you?”

His annoyingly handsome face hardens. Yes, even more than usual. “I would *not* lie to you.” He says it in an earnest, pissed-off tone, as though it’s important to him that I believe him. Ha.

“I’m sure you wouldn’t.” I push away from the door and amble around the office. “And you would *not* single me out to point out a dress code that is obviously never enforced, nor would you make it impossible for me to get into my office without having to beg to be let in.” I stop in front of a library shelf. Scattered between the engineering tomes I notice a handful of personal items. They humanize Levi in a way I’m not ready for: a child’s drawing of a black cat; a few bobbleheads from sci-fi movies; two framed pictures. One is Levi and another tall, dark-haired man free-climbing a rock formation. The other, a woman. Very beautiful. Long, dark blond hair. Young, probably Levi’s age. She smiles at the camera, holding a toddler with a full head of dark curls. The frame is clearly homemade, buttons and shells and sticks glued together.

My heart lurches, heavy.

I knew he had a child. I’ve even turned this piece of information around in my head several times since finding out. And I’m not surprised that he’s married. He doesn’t wear a ring, but that doesn’t mean anything—I often *do* wear a ring, and I’m most definitely *not* married. Honestly, I’m not sure why this hits me so hard. I certainly have no personal stake in Levi’s romantic life, and I don’t usually go about feeling jealous when people find themselves happily paired. But the domesticity that the picture conjures, just like the soft, intimate tone his voice took last week when he answered the call . . . very clearly, Levi has a *home*. A place in the world, just for

himself. Someone to go back to every night. And on top of that, his career is more stable than mine.

Levi Ward, lord of a thousand glares and a million rude nods, *belongs*. And I don't. The universe is truly not fair.

I sigh, defeated, and turn around to face him. "Just tell me why, Levi."

"It's a complicated situation."

"Is it? Seems pretty simple."

He shakes his head, carefully considers what to say, and then somehow lands on the most ridiculous five words I've ever heard. "Give me a few days."

"A few days? Levi, Rocío and I moved here to work. We left our friends, families, partners in Maryland, and now we're twiddling our thumbs—"

"Then go home for a few days." His tone is harsh. "Visit your partner, come back later—"

"That's *not* the damn point!" I aggressively run a hand through my bangs. Reike said that I should confront him calmly, but that horse is out of the stable and galloping around the moors. I'm pretty sure Levi's neighbors can hear me raise my voice, and I'm fully okay with it. "I have the head of NIH wanting progress reports from me, and my boss threatening to send in someone else if I don't get him results soon. I *need* my equipment. I'm not asking you to do this for me—do it for the project!" I must have moved closer, or maybe he to me, because all of a sudden I can smell him. Pine and soap and clean male skin. "Do you even care about BLINK?"

His eyes blaze. "I *care*. Do not *ever* imply otherwise," he grits out, leaning forward. I've never hated someone this intensely. I never will again. I believe it as deeply as I do cell theory.

"You sure don't *act* like you do."

"You don't know what you're talking about."

"And *you*"—I step closer, stabbing my finger into his chest—"don't know how to run a project."

"I am asking you to *trust* me."

“Trust you?” I laugh in his face. “Why the hell should I trust *you*?” I stab my finger at him again, and this time he closes his palm around it to stop me.

Something odd happens. His grip slides down to my palm, and for a moment he’s almost holding my hand in his. It makes my skin tingle and my breath catch—his, too. It must be his cue to realize that he’s touching me—me, the most abhorrent creature of the seven seas. He lets go immediately, as if burned.

“I am doing what I can,” he begins.

“Which is *nothing*.”

“—with the resources I have—”

“Oh, come *on*.”

“—and there are things you don’t know—”

“Then *tell* me! Explain!”

The ensuing silence clinches it for me. The way his jaw tightens, the fact that he straightens and turns abruptly, pacing three steps away as though he is finished with this. With me. *You never even started, asshole.*

“Right. Well.” I shrug. “I’m going to your superior, Levi.”

He gives me a shocked look. “What?”

Oh, *now* he is worried. How the worm has turned. How the cookie crumbles. “I need to get BLINK started. You’re leaving me no choice but to go over your head.”

“Over my head?” He briefly closes his eyes. “There is no such thing.”

“I— Do you—” I sputter. God, this man’s ego must have its own gravitational field. He’s a human pit stuffed full of dark matter and hubris. “Do you even *hear* yourself?”

“Don’t do it, Bee.”

“Why *shouldn’t* I? Are you going to call StimCase and get me my equipment? Are you going to get us an office that isn’t away from everyone? Are you going to start inviting us to essential meetings?”

“It’s not that simple—”

What an asswipe. “But it is. It’s pretty damn simple, and if you don’t commit to fixing this, you don’t get to tell me not to go to your superior.”

“You don’t want to do that.”

Is he *threatening* me? “See, I thought so, too. But now I’m pretty sure I do. Watch me.”

I spin on my heels and head for the door, ready to walk straight to Boris’s office, but when my hand is on the knob something occurs to me and I turn around.

“And one more thing,” I snarl into his stony face. “Vegan donuts are for *vegans*, you absolute walnut.”

• • •

LEVI CAN’T BE too distressed by our conversation, because he doesn’t even attempt to come after me. I’m pumped full of rage and want to march to Boris, but I run into Rocío down the hallway. She’s dragging her feet, staring vacantly at the floor like an inmate on death row. Even more than usual.

I stop. As impatient as I am to get my equipment and ruin a career, I think I love Rocío more than I hate Levi. Though it’s a close call.

“How did the GRE go?” The Graduate Record Examination is like the SATs: a stupid standardized test on which students need to get an absurdly high score to be accepted into grad school—even though it tests nothing that has to do with academic success. I remember agonizing over my scores in my last year of college, terrified that they wouldn’t be high enough to get me into the same programs as Tim. As it turned out, mine were higher than his, and I ended up with several more acceptances than he had. In hindsight, I should have gone to UCLA and left him behind. It would have saved me a lot of heartache *and* minimized my Wardass exposure.

“Bee.” Rocío shakes her head gloomily. “Which way is the ocean?”

I point to my left. She immediately begins shuffling her feet in that direction.

“Ro, you first have to get out of the building and . . . what are you doing?”

“I shall walk into the sea. Farewell.”

“Wait.” I circle around her. “How did it go?”

She shakes her head again. Her eyes are red-rimmed. “Low.”

“How low?”

“*Too* low.”

“Well, you don’t need ninety-ninth percentile to get into Johns Hopkins —”

“Fortieth for quantitative. Fifty-second for verbal.”

Okay. That *is* low. “—and you can always retake.”

“For two hundred bucks. And it’s my third time—I don’t get any better, no matter how much I practice. It’s like I’m jinxed.” She stares into the distance. “Is it La Llorona? Does she want me to quit academia and haunt creeks with her? Perhaps I should depart my scientific pursuits.”

“No. I’ll help you get your scores up, okay?”

“How? Will you cast a counterspell? Will you promise her your firstborn and the blood of one hundred virgin ravens?”

“What? No. I’ll tutor you.”

“Tutor me?” She scowls. “Can you even do math?”

I don’t point out that my entire body of work consists of high-level statistics applied to the study of the brain, and instead pull her in for a hug. “It’ll be okay, I promise.”

“What’s happening? Why are you squeezing me with your body?”

The entire conversation lasts less than ten minutes, but it proves to be a fatal mistake. Because by the time I’m on the mostly deserted third floor of the building, standing outside Boris’s office and ready to rat Levi out within an inch of his life, the door is closed, and I can hear voices inside.

And one of those voices is Levi Ward’s.

6

HESCHL'S GYRUS: HEAR, HEAR

I CANNOT BELIEVE he got to Boris before I could. I cannot believe he sneaked past me while I was talking with Rocío. Though I absolutely should, since it's the exact kind of dick move I've come to expect from him. I actually stomp my foot like a surly six-year-old. That's what I've been reduced to. What do I do? Do I barge in and stop Levi from poisoning Boris's mind with lies? Do I wait for Levi to get out and focus on damage control? Do I curl into a ball and cry?

Dr. Curie would know what to do. Dr. Königswasser, on the other hand, is looking around like a lost calf, grateful that there's no one around to see her sulking outside the director of research's office. When I decided to become a scientist, I figured I'd grapple with theoretical framework issues, research protocols, statistical modeling. Instead here I am, living my best high school life.

And then I realize I can make out some words.

"—unprofessional," Levi is saying.

"I agree," Boris replies.

"And not conducive to scientific progress." He sounds calmly exasperated, which should be technically impossible, but Levi does have a knack for bringing oxymorons to life. "The situation is unsustainable."

"I *fully* agree."

"You've said that every time we've talked before, but I doubt you understand how catastrophic the long-term repercussions can be for BLINK, for NIH, and for NASA. And this is unpleasant on an interpersonal level, too." I lean closer to the door, white-knuckled. I cannot believe he's feeding Boris this crap. *I* am unpleasant to him? *How?* By being offensive to look at? I'm about to slam the door open to defend myself when he continues, "She cannot continue like this. Something must be done." Oh my God. Am I trapped in a bizarro dimension?

"Okay. What would you have me do with her?"

I'm going to screech. Whatever Levi says, it's going to make me yell with rage. I'm already vibrating with an un-screamed howl. It's rising up my throat.

"I want you to let her do her job."

Up and up and up my larynx, through my vocal box, and—wait. *What?* What did Levi say?

"I've done as much as I can." Boris is faintly apologetic. Levi, on the other hand, is hard and uncompromising.

"It's not enough. I need her to have authorized access to every BLINK-related area in the building, to have a NASA.gov email address, to attend project meetings. I need every single piece of equipment she asked for to be here *now*—it should have arrived ages ago."

"You're the one who canceled the order that was placed."

"Because it wasn't the system she asked for. Why would I blow a chunk of our budget on an inferior product?"

"Levi, just like I told you every single day you've come to me with this last week, sometimes it's not about science—it's about politics."

I am fully leaning my ear and palms against the door now. My fingers shake against the wood, but I don't *feel* them. I'm numb.

"Politics is above my pay grade, Boris."

"Not above mine. We've been over this—things have changed a lot, and very quickly. The director was on board with an NIH-NASA collaboration

as long as NASA got credit and autonomy on the project. Then NIH insisted on having a larger role. NASA can't have it."

"NASA *must* have it."

"The director is under lots of pressure. The possible ramifications are huge—if we patent the technology, there's no telling how widely it can be applied and what the revenue might be. He doesn't want NIH to own half of the patent."

A pause, brimming with frustration. I can almost picture Levi running a hand through his hair. "NASA doesn't have the budget to do the project alone—that's why NIH was brought in to begin with. Are you telling me that they'd rather have BLINK not happen at all than share the credit? And who will be in charge of the neuroscience portion?"

"Dr. Königswasser is not the only neuroscientist in the world. We have several at NASA who are—"

"Not *nearly* as good as her, not when it comes to neurostimulation."

This *is* a bizarro world. More bizarre than I could ever imagine. I'm in the Upside Down, my heart's thudding in my ears, and Levi Ward just said something *nice* about me. A cold, slimy feeling coils in the pit of my stomach. I might throw up, except that I'm completely hollow. I was full of rage when I came here, but that's draining.

"We'll make do. Levi, BLINK will be moved to the next budget review, and by then NASA will approve full funding. That way we won't need NIH. You'll still be in charge."

"That's a *year* from now, and you can't guarantee that. Just like you can't guarantee that the Sullivan prototype will be used."

A pause. "Son, I understand this is important to you. I feel the same, but —"

"I doubt it."

"Excuse me?"

Levi's voice could cut titanium. "I seriously doubt you feel the same."

"Levi—"

"If you do, authorize the equipment purchase."

A sigh. “Levi, I like you. I really do. You’re a smart guy. One of the best engineers I know—maybe the best. But you’re young and have no idea about the pressure everyone’s under. BLINK’s unlikely to happen this year. Better make peace with it.”

Seconds pass. I can’t hear Levi’s reply, so I lean in even farther—which turns out to be a terrible idea, because the door swings open. I jump back quickly enough that Boris doesn’t see me, but when Levi steps outside I’m still standing right there, by the office. He slams the door and begins stalking away angrily. Then he notices me and freezes.

He looks furious. And big. Furiously big.

I should say something. Play it cool. Make it seem like I only just wandered here, looking for the office supply closet. *Oh, Levi, do you know where they keep the pencil sharpeners?* Problem is, that ship has long sailed, and while we study each other with equally raw expressions, I experience an odd, transient feeling. Like this is the first time Levi sees me. No, not quite: like this is the first time *I* see him. Like the elaborate maze of mirrors through which we’ve been looking at each other has been shattered, the shards swept away.

I can’t bear it. I lower my gaze to my feet. Thankfully, the feeling dissolves as I stare at the pretty daisies on my faux-leather sandals.

My fingers need to quit shaking or I’ll chop them off. If my tear ducts dare to let even a single drop slip through, I’ll tie them shut forever. I’m almost ready to look up again without making a fool of myself, when a large hand closes firmly around my elbow. Shouldn’t have worn a sleeveless top today. “What are you—?”

Levi lifts one finger to his lips to signal me to be quiet and leads me away from the office.

“Where—” I start, but he interrupts me with a low whisper.

“Hush.” His grip is gentle but tight around my flesh. I’m dismayed to find that it seems to help with my nausea.

Without having a clue of what to do, I close my eyes and follow his lead.

• • •

I'M A SLOW processor. Always have been.

When my nonna died, everyone around me had been sobbing for several minutes by the time I finally parsed what the white-haired doctor was saying. When Reike decided to take a gap decade to go travel the world, I didn't realize how lonely I'd be until she was on a plane to Indonesia. When Tim moved out of our apartment, the implications only hit me several days later, the moment I found two of his mismatched socks still in the dryer.

Probably why the enormity of what I heard outside Boris's office doesn't fully dawn on me until I'm on one of the benches in the little picnic area behind the Discovery Building, elbows on my knees and forehead in my hands.

It's such a lovely spot. The shades of two cedar elms and a live oak cross right where I'm sitting. *I need to eat lunch out here from now on,* I think. *Then my Lean Cuisine won't stink up the office.* My stomach twists. There might not be an *on* from this *now*.

"Are you okay?"

I glance up, and up, and up. Levi is standing in front me, still icily furious but more in control. Like he counted to ten to calm down a bit, but would gladly go back to one and flip a desk or three. There's a hint of concern in his eyes, and for some reason I'm thinking *again* of him pinning me to the wall, of the smell of his skin, the feeling of his hard muscles under my fingers.

There's something *very* wrong with my brain.

"I double-checked," he murmurs. "I received seven emails from you, and all my replies were sent. I'm not sure why they didn't deliver. I'm assuming the same happened to the one Guy sent to invite you to today's meeting, and I take responsibility for it. You should have a NASA email address by now."

The weather outside is perfectly nice, but I'm cold and sweaty at the same time. What a complex organism, my body.

"Why?" I ask. I'm not even sure what I'm referring to.

He exhales slowly. "How much did you hear?"

"I don't know. A lot."

He nods. “NASA wants exclusive control of whatever patent comes out of BLINK. But it currently doesn’t have the budget to pull off the project, and there was some arm-twisting to include NIH. But NIH is insisting on co-owning the patent, and NASA decided that letting BLINK die a natural death is better than picking a fight with NIH.”

“And this is it? The natural death?”

He doesn’t answer, simply continuing to study me with worry and something else, something I can’t quite put my finger on. It’s unsettling, and I nearly laugh when I realize why: this is the first time Levi has sustained eye contact with me for more than a second. The first time his eyes don’t flit away to some point above my head right after meeting mine.

I turn away. I’m not in the mood for ice green. “What if I told NIH?”

A brief hesitation. “You could.”

“But?”

“No buts. It’d be fully within your rights. I’ll support you, if you need me to.”

“. . . But?”

I look at him. There are small scratches on his hand; hairs dust his forearm; his shirt stretches across his shoulder. He’s so imposing from this angle, even more than usual. What did they feed him growing up, fertilizer? “If you told NIH, the only outcome I can imagine is NIH pulling out and the relationship between NIH and the human research branch of NASA souring. BLINK would be shelved until—”

“—until next year. And it would still be a NASA-only project.” Either way, I’m screwed. Catch-22. Never liked that novel.

“I’m not saying you shouldn’t do it,” he says carefully, “but if the endgame is to make BLINK happen as a collaborative project, it might not be the best move.”

Not to mention that I’d need to get Trevor to believe that this isn’t my fault. Seems like I’d have better luck just telling him that NASA has been taken over by shape-shifting aliens. Yeah, I’ll try that. Might as well.

“What’s the alternative?” I ask. I see none.

“I’ve been working on it.”

"How?"

"I think having Boris on our side would help immensely. And there are . . . things that I might be able to leverage to persuade him."

"And how are those *things* working out for you?"

He gives me a dirty look, but there's no real heat behind it. "Not great. *Yet*," he grumbles.

No shit, Sherlock. "Basically, I'm the only person in the world who wants BLINK to happen now."

He frowns. "I want it, too." I remember his earlier anger, when I accused him of not caring. God, that was probably less than an hour ago. Feels like nine decades. "And so do other people. The engineers, the astronauts, contractors who'd be out of a job if it were postponed." His broad shoulders seem to deflate a bit. "Though you and I seem to be the highest-ranking people on board. Which is why we need Boris."

"It sounds like if you sit tight for a few months the project will fall in your lap and—"

"No." He shakes his head. "BLINK has to happen now. If it's delayed there's a chance that I won't be in charge, or that the original prototype will be modified." He sounds so uncompromising, I wonder if this is his pick-up-your-toys-and-go-to-bed dad voice. It sure seems effective. If I end up having kids, I hope I can pull off something this authoritative.

"Still, you'll be fine no matter what." I can't keep the bitterness out of my tone. "While NIH is making personnel cuts, and the main criterion is successfully completed grants. Which I don't have because of . . . reasons, reasons that have little to do with me not trying or not being a good scientist —which I am, I promise I *am* good at this, and—"

"I know you are," he interrupts. He sounds sincere. "And this project is not just another assignment for me. I transferred teams to be here. I pulled strings."

I run a hand down my face. What a dumpster fire. "You could have told me that NASA was roadblocking. Instead of letting me believe that you were . . ."

He looks at me blankly. "That I was?"

"You know. Trying to oust me for the usual reasons."

"The usual reasons?"

"Yeah." I shrug. "From grad school."

"What reasons from grad school?"

"Just the fact that you . . . you know."

"I'm not sure I do."

I scratch my forehead, exhausted. "That you despise me."

He gives me an astonished look, like I just coughed up a hair ball. Like the person who avoided me like I was a flesh-eating porcupine was his evil twin. He's speechless for a moment, and then says, somehow managing to sound honest, "Bee. I don't despise you."

Wow. *Wow*, for so many reasons. The blatant lie, for instance, like he doesn't consider me the human equivalent of gas station sushi, but also . . . this is the first time Levi has used my name. I haven't kept track or anything, but there's something so uniquely *him* in the way he says the word, I could never forget.

"Right." He keeps staring at me with the same disoriented, earnest expression. I snort and smile. "I guess I must have misread every single one of our grad school interactions, then." He did tell Boris I'm a good neuroscientist, so maybe he doesn't think I'm incompetent like I always suspected. Maybe he just hates . . . literally everything else about me. Lovely.

"You *know* I don't despise you," he insists with a hint of accusation.

"Sure I do."

"Bee."

He says my name again, with that *voice*, and all I see is red.

"But *of course* I know. How could I *not* know when you've been so relentlessly cold, arrogant, and unapproachable." I stand, anger bubbling up my throat. "For years you have avoided me, refused to collaborate with me without valid reasons, denied me even minimally polite conversation, treated me as though I was repulsive and inferior—you even told my fiancé that he should marry someone else, but *of course you don't despise me, Levi.*"

His Adam's apple bobs. He stares at me like that, stricken, disconcerted, like I just hit him with a polo mallet—when all I've done is tell the truth. My eyes sting. I bite my lip to keep the tears at bay, but my stupid body betrays me once again and I'm crying, I'm crying in front of him, and I *hate* him.

I'm not mad at him—I *hate* him.

For the way he's treated me. For having the solid career I don't. For concealing the politics of this damn septic tank of a project. I hate him, hate him, *hate him*, with a passion I thought I could only reserve for defective airbags, or Tim, or the third move of the year. I hate him for reducing me to this, and for sticking around to see his handiwork.

I hate him. And I don't want to feel so much.

"Bee—"

"This is not worth it." I wipe my cheek with the back of my hand and walk past without looking at him. Of course he has to be massive and make *that* hard, too.

"Wait."

"I'll tell NIH about what's happening," I say without stopping or turning back. "I can't risk my superiors thinking that the project failed because of me. I'm sorry if that puts you in a bad position, and I'm sorry if that means delaying BLINK."

"That's okay. But please, wait—"

No. I don't want to wait, or to listen to even one more word. I keep on walking in my pretty daisy sandals until I can't hear him anymore, until I can't see through the blur of my tears. I walk out of the Space Center and fantasize that I'm leaving Houston, Texas, the United States. I fantasize about getting on a plane and flying to Portugal to get a hug from Reike.

I fantasize all the way home, and it doesn't make me feel any better.

• • •

I'M STARING AT my phone—just that: brooding and staring at my phone—when a Twitter notification pops up on my screen.

> @SabriRocks95 Second year geology Ph.D. student going through a rough patch, here. @WhatWouldMarieDo if she felt like the universe is trying to tell her to give up?

Ouch. This one hits a little too close. My sense of helplessness reached critical mass earlier today, halfway through Alanis Morissette's discography and well past my second tub of orange sherbet. I feel like I was run through a paper shredder. Like a used Q-tip. A flushable wipe. Not fit to give advice to the moth that's been fluttering against my window, let alone an intelligent young woman with career trouble. I retweet, hoping that the WWMD community will take care of @SabriRocks95.

"Maybe I should quit academia," I muse, leaning back in my chair, staring across the open-plan kitchen to Dr. Curie's magnet. "Should I quit my job?"

Marie doesn't reply. Silent approval? There are things I could do. Brush up on the German accusative and meet Reike in Greece, where olive oil tycoons would hire us to instruct their teenaged heirs. Shop that sitcom idea I once had: a Bayesian statistician and a frequentist become reluctant roommates. Write my mermaid YA series. Move under a bridge and ask riddles in exchange for safe passage.

Maybe I shouldn't quit. At least one Königswasser twin needs a stable job, to post bail when the other gets arrested for indecent exposure. Knowing Reike, that's any day now.

Then again, I'm fairly sure that without BLINK, Trevor won't renew my contract anyway.

My career is the ultimate unrequited love story, littered with well-reviewed grants that never got funded for political reasons, a shitty boss instead of the rock star I was promised, and now NIH and NASA petty-fighting like cousins at Thanksgiving. When your supposed big break turns into a losing game, that's when you cut your losses, right?

But what would be left of me without neuroscience? Who would I even be without my burning need to correct people who say that humans use only

10 percent of their brain? (They even made *a movie* about this. For fuck's sake, does no one fact-check Hollywood scripts?) Did you know that conservatives tend to have larger amygdalae than liberals? That taxi drivers' hippocampi grow bigger as they memorize how to navigate London? That brain differences predict variations in personality? We are our nervous systems, the complex combination of billions of neurons firing in distinctive patterns. What's more exciting than spending my life figuring out what a little chunk of these neurons can accomplish?

I avoid my reflection as I brush my teeth. Maybe I love what I do too much. I should go back to school for something boring. Auctioneering. Naval architecture. Sports broadcasting. I should also stop crying. Or maybe not. Maybe I should feel all my feelings now, so I can be solution-oriented later. All wept-out for tomorrow, when I explain this mess to Trevor. When I tell Rocío to pack her bags.

The second my head touches my pillow I know I'll explode if I don't do something. *Anything*. On impulse, I message Shmac.

MARIE: Do you ever think of leaving research?

His reply is immediate.

SHMAC: Sure am today

MARIE: You hate your life, too? What are the chances.

SHMAC: Maybe we're the same astrological sign.

MARIE: lol

SHMAC: What's going on?

MARIE: My project's a shitshow. And I'm working with this total camel dick who's the worst. I bet he's one of

those assholes who doesn't switch to airplane mode during takeoff, Shmac. He probably bites into popsicles. I'm positive he sneezes in his palm and then shakes people's hands.

SHMAC: Eerily specific.

MARIE: But true!

SHMAC: I don't doubt it.

MARIE: How's the girl?

SHMAC: Still married. Plus, she probably thinks I'm a camel dick.

MARIE: She could never. You two having a torrid affair yet?

SHMAC: The opposite.

MARIE: Did she at least get ugly while she was gone?

SHMAC: She's still the most beautiful thing I've ever seen.

My heart skips a beat. Oh, Shmac.

SHMAC: That aside, I've been thinking about how much easier my life would be if I quit and became a cat trainer. Except, I can't even convince my cat not to piss under my living room carpet.

MARIE: I can see how that would be an issue.

MARIE: Do you ever feel like we put too much of ourselves into this?

SHMAC: On the bad days, for sure.

MARIE: Are there good days? Ever?

SHMAC: My last one was in middle school. Second place at the science fair.

MARIE: Did you win a Toys R Us gift certificate?

SHMAC: Nope. A Marie Curie bobblehead, holding two beakers that glow in the dark.

MARIE: Omg. I would MURDER for that.

SHMAC: If we ever meet in person, it's yours.

We chat for a long time, and it's nice to commiserate while it lasts, but once I set my phone on the nightstand I feel hopeless again. The last thing I see before falling asleep is Levi's stricken expression when I threw at him all the things he did to me, painted on the back of my eyelids like the poster of a movie I never want to watch again.

7

ORBITOFRONTAL CORTEX: HOPE

MY ALARM RINGS, but I let it snooze.

Once. Twice. Three times, five, eight, twelve, why the hell is it still ringing, why did I even set it—

"Bee?"

I open my eyes. Barely. They're bleary, sticky with sleep.

"Bee?"

Crap. I inadvertently answered a call from an unknown number. "Shisshishee," I slur. Then I spit out my retainer. "Sorry, this is she."

"I need you to come in right now."

I instantly recognize the baritone. "Levi?" I blink at my alarm. It's 6:43 a.m. I can't keep my lids up. "What? Come where?"

"Can you be in Boris's office by seven?"

That makes me sit up in bed. Or as close as I can manage at this hour. "What are you talking about?"

"Do you want to stay and work on BLINK?" His voice is firm. Decisive. I can hear background noise. He must be outside, walking somewhere.

"What?"

"Have you told NIH about what NASA is doing yet?"

"Not yet, but—"

“Then do you want to stay and work on BLINK?”

I press my palm into my eye. This is a nightmare, right? “I thought we agreed that’s not an option.”

“It might be now. I have . . . something.” A pause. “A bit of a gamble, though.”

“What is it?”

“Something that’ll get Boris to support us.” He cuts off for a second. “—can’t explain on the phone.”

It sounds sketchy. Like he’s trying to lure me to a secondary location to traffic me to people who’ll harvest my femurs to make handles for badminton racquets.

“Can’t we just meet later?”

“No. Boris is having a call with the NASA director in one hour, we need to catch him before then.”

I run a hand over my face. I’m way too pooped for this. “Levi, this sounds very weird and I just woke up. If you’re trying to get me alone to assassinate me, could we just go ahead, pretend you did it, and go our separate ways—”

“Listen. What you said yesterday . . .” He must have stepped inside, because the background noise is gone. His voice is rich and deep in my ear. I think I can actually hear him swallow. “There is no other neuroscientist I’d want to do this project with. Not a single one.”

It’s a blow to the sternum. The words knock the air out of my lungs, and a weird, nonsensical, untimely thought crosses my mind: it’s not *that* surprising that this broody, reserved man snagged himself a beautiful bride. Not if he’s capable of saying things like this.

At least I’m awake now. “What’s happening?”

“Bee, do you *want* to stay in Houston and work on BLINK?” he asks again, but this time after a pause he adds, “With me?”

That’s when I know that I’m a lunatic. Insane. An utterly insane lunatic. Because my alarm says six forty-five a.m., and a shiver runs down my spine —or where my spine would be if I had one. I screw my eyes shut, and the word that comes out of my mouth is:

"Yeah."

• • •

I STUMBLE OUT of the elevator two minutes past seven, energized by a night of restful sleep and dressed for success.

Just kidding. I'm wearing leggings and a flannel shirt, I forgot to put on a bra, and having to choose between brushing my teeth and washing my face I went for the former, which means that when Levi spots me I'm frantically trying to scrape sleep boogers from my eyes. I feel jittery *and* drowsy—the worst possible combination. Levi is waiting by Boris's office, put together like it's not the middle of the night, and knocks on the door the moment he sees me. I break into a light jog, and by the time I get there I'm also sweaty and out of breath.

My life is so lovely. As lovely as a spinal tap.

"What is going on?"

"No time to explain. But like I said, it's a gamble. Pretend you already know when we're in there."

I frown. "Know *what*?"

Boris yells at us to come in.

"Just follow my lead," Levi says, gesturing me inside.

"We're supposed to be co-leads," I mutter.

The corner of his lip twitches up. "Follow my co-lead, then."

"Please, tell me this mess doesn't end in a murder-suicide."

He opens the door and shrugs, ushering me in with a hand between my shoulder blades. "Guess we'll see."

Boris had no idea we'd show up. His eyes roll and narrow, a mix of *I'm tired* and *Not you two* and *I don't have time for this*, and he stands from behind his desk with his hands on his hips.

I take a step back. What is this car crash of a meeting? What did I get myself into? And why, oh *why* did I ever think that trusting Levi Ward would be a good idea?

“No,” Boris says, “Levi, I’m not going to go over this again, and not in front of an NIH employee. I have a meeting that I need to prep for, so . . .” The annoyance in his voice fades as Levi, unruffled, sets his phone on the desk. There’s a picture on the screen, but I can’t make out what it is. I push up on my toes and lean forward to see, but Levi pulls on the back of my flannel and lifts one eyebrow—which I believe means *You’re supposed to follow my lead.* I frown in my best *Sure would be nice to know what’s going on, but whatever.*

When I glance at Boris, there’s a deep horizontal line in the middle of his forehead. “Did you make some changes to the helmet prototype? I don’t remember authorizing—”

“I did not.”

“This doesn’t look like what I approved.”

“It’s not.” Levi holds out his hand, and when Boris returns the phone, he pulls up another picture. A person, wearing something on their head. The line on Boris’s brow deepens even more.

“When was the picture taken?”

“That, I’d rather not say.”

Boris’s gaze sharpens. “Levi, if you’re making this up because of yesterday’s conversation—”

“The name of the company is MagTech. They are very well-established, based in Rotterdam, and do science tech. They’ve been open about the fact that they’re working on wireless neurostimulation helmets.” A pause. “They have a fairly long history of supplying armed forces and militias with combat gadgets.”

“Which armed forces?”

“Whoever can pay.”

“How far ahead are they?”

“Based on those blueprints and on my . . . contact’s information, pretty much where BLINK’s at.” He holds Boris’s eyes a little too intensely. “At least, where BLINK *was* at. Before it was shelved.”

Boris risks a quick glance at me. “Technically, the project was never shelved,” he says defensively.

“Technically.” There is something commanding about the way Levi talks, even to his boss. Boris flushes and returns the phone. I pluck it from Levi’s hand before he can pocket it and study the pictures.

It’s a neurostimulation helmet—the blueprints and the prototype. Not quite ours, but similar. *Scarily* similar. *Oh shit we have competition* similar.

“Do they know about BLINK?” Boris is asking.

“Unclear. But they wouldn’t have seen our prototype.”

“They don’t have a neuroscientist on their team. Not a good one,” I add distractedly.

“How do you know that?” Boris asks.

I shrug. “Well, it’s pretty obvious. They’re making the same mistake Levi is—the output locations. Honestly, why can’t engineers ever be bothered to consult with experts outside of their discipline? Is it part of vector calculus? First rule of engineering: do not display weakness. Never ask questions. Better to finish a wrong, unusable prototype on your own than to collaborate with—” I look up, notice the way Boris and Levi are staring at me, and slap my mouth shut. I really shouldn’t be allowed in public before coffee. “Point is,” I say after clearing my throat, “they’re not doing so hot, and as soon as they start trying out the helmet in action they’ll realize it.” I give Levi’s phone back, and his fingers brush mine, rough and warm. Our eyes meet for a split second, then flit away.

“The blueprint,” Boris says. “And the picture. Where did you get them?”

“That’s not important.”

Boris’s eyes go dinner-plate wide. “Please, tell me my lead engineer didn’t just jeopardize his career by engaging in some light industrial espionage—”

“Boris,” Levi interrupts him, “this changes things. We need to be working on BLINK. Now. Those helmets are conceptually similar to ours. If MagTech gets to a working prototype and patents the tech before we do, we’ll have flushed millions of dollars down the toilet. And there’s no telling what they’ll do with their design. Who they’ll sell it to.” Boris closes his eyes and scratches his forehead. It must be the sign of weariness Levi was waiting for, because he adds, “Bee and I are here. Ready. We can finish this

project in three months—*if* we have the necessary equipment. We can see this through."

Boris doesn't open his eyes. The opposite: he scrunches them shut, as though he hates every second of this. "Can you really? Get this done in three months?"

Levi turns to me.

I honestly have no idea. Science doesn't work like that. It doesn't do deadlines or consolation trophies. You can design the perfect study, sleep one hour a night, feed on nothing but despair and Lean Cuisine for months on end, and your results can still be the opposite of what you were hoping to find. Science doesn't give a shit. Science is reliable in its variability. Science does whatever the fuck it wants. God, I love science.

But I smile brilliantly. "Of course we can. And much better than those Dutch guys."

"Okay. Okay." Boris runs a hand through his hair, harried. "I have a meeting with the director in—damn, ten minutes. I'll push for this. I'll be in touch later today, but . . . yeah. Things are different, with this." He gives Levi a part-irritated, part-exhausted, part-admiring look. "I suppose I owe you my congratulations on bringing BLINK back from the dead." My stomach somersaults. Holy shit. *Holy shit*. This is happening after all. "If I convince the director, there's *no* margin of error. You'll have to make the best neurostimulation helmets in the damn world." Levi and I exchange a long glance and nod at the same time. When we step out of the office, Boris is swearing softly.

I'm mildly terrified by this turn of events. If we do get the go-ahead, everyone and their mother will be breathing down our necks. The honchos at NASA and NIH will vulture-circle on top of us. I'm going to have to explain to some creationist white guy on his twelfth senate term that brain stimulation is *not* the same thing as acupressure.

Oh, who am I kidding? I wouldn't even mind it for a chance to actually work on BLINK and fix all those stubborn engineers' mistakes. A chance that seemed long gone less than an hour ago, but now . . .

I press a hand against my lips, exhaling a laugh. It's going to happen. Well, it's *probably* going to happen. But NASA's supposed to be chock-full of geniuses who'll get us to Mars, no? They won't be so stupid to block the project, not if it's a now-or-never situation. I have no idea how Levi did it, but—

Levi.

I look up and there he is, staring at me with a soft smile as I grin into the ether like an idiot. I should snap at him to look away, but when our eyes meet I only want to grin more. We stand like that for several seconds, smiling moronically outside Boris's office, until his expression goes serious.

"Bee." What *is* it about the way he says my name? The pitch? His deep voice? Something else altogether? "About yesterday—"

I shake my head. "No. I . . ." God, this apology is going to be painful. Humiliating, too. The colonoscopy of apologies. Better get it over with. "Listen, you should have been more forthcoming about what was going on, but I probably shouldn't have called you a . . . boob. Or a walnut. I'm not sure what was in my head and what I actually said out loud but . . . I'm sorry about coming to your office and insulting you." There. Done. Colonoscopy's over. My intestines are sparkling clean.

Except that Levi doesn't even acknowledge my apology. "What you said, about me despising you. About things that I have done, I—"

"No, I was out of line. I mean, it's all true, but—" I take a deep breath. "Listen, you have every right not to like me as long as you deal with it professionally. Even though, let's be real, what's wrong with you? I'm an absolute delight." I give him an impish grin, but he doesn't get that I'm teasing, because he stares at me with a toned-down version of yesterday's stricken expression. Oops. I rock on my heels and clear my throat. "Sorry. Just kidding. I know there's plenty to dislike about me and you are . . . you, while I am . . . yeah. Me. Very different. I know we're nemesis of sorts—nemeses? Nemesi? Anyway, I got upset because I thought you were letting that dictate your behavior on BLINK. But clearly that's not the case, so I apologize for assuming, and—feel free to carry on." I manage a mostly

sincere smile. “As long as you’re civil and fair at work, you can dislike away. Loathe me up. Abhor me to the moon. Detest me into the unknown.” I really mean it. Not that I relish the idea of him hating me, but it’s such a great improvement over yesterday, when I thought that his dislike would ruin my career, that I’m coming to peace with this. Sort of. “Did you *actually* engage in industrial espionage?”

“No. Maybe. A friend knows someone who works for—” Levi closes his eyes. “Bee. You don’t understand.”

I cock my head. “What don’t I understand?”

“I don’t dislike you.”

“Right.” Uh-huh. “So you’ve been acting like an ass to me for seven years because . . . ?”

He sighs, his broad chest moving up and down. There’s a tuft of fur on the sleeve of his shirt. Does he have a pet? He looks like a dog person. Maybe it’s his daughter’s dog.

“Because I *am* an ass. An idiot, too.”

“Levi, it’s fine. I understand, really. When we lived in France, my sister loved this classmate of ours, Ines, and I could *not* stand her. I wanted to pull her braid for no reason. I actually did, once, which was . . . unfortunate, because my French aunt believed in sending kids to bed without dinner.” I shrug. Levi is pinching the bridge of his nose, probably shocked by how much I ramble when I’m still half-asleep. One more thing for him to hate about me, I guess. “The point is, sometimes dislike is a gut reaction. Like falling in love at first sight, you know? Just . . . the opposite.”

His eyes spring open. “Bee.” He swallows. “I—”

“Levi! Here you are.” Kaylee is walking toward us, an iPad in her hand. I wave at her, but Levi doesn’t stop staring. At me. “I need your approval on two items, and you and Guy have a meeting with Jonas in . . . Levi?”

He is, for unknown reasons, *still* staring at me. And the stricken expression is back. Do I have a sleep booger on my nose?

“Levi?”

Third time must be the charm, because he finally looks away. “Hey, Kaylee.”

They start talking and I walk away with another wave, daydreaming about coffee and a bra. I don't know why I turn around one last time, right before stepping into the elevator. I really don't know why, but Levi is looking at me again.

Even though Kaylee is still talking.

• • •

IT'S TWO P.M., I'm wearing a bra (yes, a sports bra is a real bra; no, I do not accept constructive criticism) and sipping my eleventh coffee of the day when I get a text from Levi.

Bee, I'm using texts since emails are unreliable. Your equipment and computers will be here tomorrow. Let's schedule a meeting to go over BLINK at your earliest convenience. Kaylee will be there shortly to set you up with NASA.gov email, so that you can access our servers. Let me know what else you need.

I can't help myself. I must have learned nothing in the past weeks, because I do it again: I shoot off my chair and jump up and down, screeching loudly and joyously in the middle of the office. *It's happening. It's happening. It's happening, it's happening, it's*—

"Um . . . Bee?"

I whirl around. Rocío is blinking at me from her desk, alarmed.

"Sorry." I flush and quickly sit back down. "Sorry. Just . . . good news."

"The dictator of veganism released you from his tyrannical clutches and you can finally eat real food?"

"What? No."

"Have you been able to reserve a cemetery plot close to Marie Curie's?"

"That would be impossible, as her ashes are enshrined in the Paris Panthéon and—" I shake my head. "Our equipment is coming! Tomorrow!"

She actually smiles. Where's a digital camera when you need it? "For real?"

"Yes! And Kaylee's on her way to set us up with NASA.gov addresses — Where are you going?" I notice her panicky expression as she stuffs her

laptop in her bag.

"Home."

"But—"

"Since the computers will be here tomorrow, there's no point in staying."

"But we can still—"

She's gone before I can remind her that I'm her boss—I *will* learn to exert authority, but today's not the day. I don't mind too much anyway. Because when the door closes behind her, I spring out of my chair again and jump up and down a little bit more.

8

PRECENTRAL GYRUS: MOVEMENT

FUN FACT: DR. Curie's BFF was an engineer.

Seems unlikely, huh? I sit across from the best and brightest of Levi's team—total Cockcluster™, naturally—and think: Who would voluntarily spend time with the engineering ilk? And yet it's true, like turkey-flavored candy corn, pimple-popping videos, and many other unlikely things.

It's painful even to think about it, but here goes my least favorite Marie fact: after Pierre died, she started seeing a strapping young physicist named Paul Langevin. Honestly, it's what she deserved. My girl was a young widow who spent most of her time stomping on uranium ore like it was wine grapes. We can all agree that if she wanted to get laid, the only adequate response should have been: "Where would you like your mattress placed, Madame Curie?" Right?

Wrong.

The press got ahold of the gossip and crucified her for it. They treated her like she'd boarded a train to Sarajevo and assassinated Franz Ferdinand herself. They whined about the lamest things: Madame Curie is a home-wrecker (Paul had separated from his wife *ages* before); Madame Curie is tarnishing Pierre's good name (Pierre was probably high-fiving her from physics heaven, which is full of atheist scientists and apple trees for Newton

and his buddies to sit under); Madame Curie is five years older than almost-forty-year-old Paul (gasp!) and therefore a cradle-robber (double-gasp!!). If there is one thing men hate more than a smart woman, it's a smart woman who makes her own choices when it comes to her own sex life. It was a whole thing: lots of sexist, antiSemitic crap was written, pistol duels were held, the words "Polish scum" were used, and Dr. Curie plunged into a deep depression.

But that's where the engineer BFF comes in.

Her name was Hertha Ayrton and she was a bit of a polymath. Think of your high school friend who always got straight A's but was also the captain of the soccer team, did lights for the drama club, and moonlighted as a suffragette leader. Hertha's famous for studying electric arcs—lightning, but way cooler. I like to fantasize about her using her scientific knowledge to burn Marie's enemies to a crisp, Zeus-style, but the truth is that their mutual love and support mostly translated into vacationing together to escape the French press.

Sometimes friendship is made of quiet little moments and doesn't involve lethal lightning bolts. Disappointing, I know. Then again, other times friendship is made of betrayal, and heartache, and spending two years trying to forget that you blocked the number of someone whose take-out orders you used to have memorized.

Anyway. The moral of this particular story is, I believe, that engineers are not *all* bad. But the ones I'm attempting to collaborate with are often stabable. Like now, for example. I have Mark, the materials guy on BLINK, looking me in the eye and telling me for the third time in two minutes: "Impossible."

Okay. Let's try again. "If we don't move the output channels farther apart—"

"Impossible."

Four. Four times in . . . Welp. *Still* two minutes.

I take a deep breath, remembering a technique my old therapist used. I saw her for a short time after Tim and I broke up, when my self-confidence was six feet under, partying it up with disgruntled grubs and Mesozoic

fossils. She taught me the importance of letting go of what I cannot control (others) and focusing on what I can (my reactions). She'd often do this crafty little thing: reframe my own statements to help me achieve self-realization.

Time to therapize Mark the Material Engineer.

"I understand that I'm asking you to do something that is *currently* impossible, given the inner shell of the helmet." I smile encouragingly. "But maybe, if I explain what needs to be done from a neuroscience perspective, we can find a way to achieve a middle ground—"

"Impossible."

I don't head-desk, but only because Levi happens to enter the room right at that moment, nodding his good morning in our general direction and rolling up the sleeves of his Henley. His forearms are strong and insanely attractive—and *why the hell am I even noticing them?* Aargh. Kaylee let us know he'd be late because of something at Penny's school. Which, I guess, is the name of his daughter. Because Levi has a daughter. I promise I'll stop repeating this fact as soon as it becomes less shocking to me (i.e., never).

Everyone greets him, and I feel a jolt to my stomach. We've been emailing, but we haven't talked in person since yesterday, when I gave him official permission to abhor me—as long as he's professional about it. I'm curious to see how he'll play. In deference to his tender sensibilities I'm wearing my tiniest septum ring and the single Ann Taylor dress I own. It's an olive branch; he damn better appreciate it.

"I see what you're saying," I tell Mark. "There are physical impossibilities inherent to the materials, but we might be able to—"

He repeats the only word he knows. "Impossible."

"—find a solution that—"

"No."

I'm about to praise the sudden variety in his vocabulary when Levi interjects. "Let her finish, Mark." He takes a seat next to me. "What were you saying, Bee?"

Huh? What's happening? "The . . . um, the issue is the outputs placement. They need to be positioned differently if we want to stimulate

the intended region."

Levi nods. "Like the angular gyrus?"

I flush. Come on, I apologized for that! I glare at him for shading me in front of his team, but I notice an odd gleam in his eyes, as though he . . . Wait. It's not possible. He's not teasing me, is he?

"Y-yes," I stammer, lost. "Like the angular gyrus. And other brain regions, too."

"And what I told her," Mark says with all the petulance of a six-year-old who's too short for the roller coaster, "is that given the property of the Kevlar blend we're using for the inner shell, the distance between outputs needs to stay the way it is."

Actually, what he told me was "Impossible." I'm about to point that out when Levi says, "Then we change the Kevlar blend." It seems to me like a perfectly reasonable avenue to explore, but the other five people at the table seem to think it's as controversial as the concept of gluten in the twenty-first century. Murmurs rise. Tongues cluck. A guy whose name might be Fred gasps.

"That would be a significant change," Mark whines.

"It's unavoidable. We need to do proper neurostimulation with the helmets."

"But that's not what the Sullivan prototype calls for."

This is the second time I've heard the Sullivan prototype mentioned, and the second time a dense silence ensues when it's brought up. The difference today is that I'm in the room, and I can see how everyone looks to Levi uneasily. Is he the main author of the prototype? Can't be, since he's new to BLINK. Sullivan is the name of the Discovery Institute, so maybe that's where it's from? I want to ask Guy, but he's off setting up equipment with Rocío and Kaylee this morning.

"We'll be as faithful as possible to the Sullivan prototype, but it was always meant to be a vehicle for the neuroscience," Levi says, firm and final as usual, with that competent, big-dick calm of his, and everyone nods somberly, more so than one would expect from a bunch of dudes who throttle one another over donuts and come into work in their pajamas.

There's clearly something I don't know. What is this place, Twin Peaks? Why's everyone so full of secrets?

We hammer out details for a couple more hours, deciding that for the next weeks I'll focus on mapping the individual brains of the first batch of astronauts while engineering refines the shell. With Levi present, his team tends to agree to my suggestions more quickly—a phenomenon known as Sausage Referencing™. Well, to Annie and me, at least. In Cockcluster™ or WurstFest™ situations, having a man vouch for you will help you be taken seriously—the better-regarded the man, the higher his Sausage Referencing™ power.

Notable example: Dr. Curie was not originally included in the Nobel Prize nomination for the radioactivity theory *she had come up with*, until Gösta Mittag-Leffler, a Swedish mathematician dude, interceded for her with the all-male award committee. Less notable example: halfway through my meeting with the engineers, when I point out that we won't be able to stimulate deep into the temporal lobe, Maybe Fred tells me, "*Actually*, we can. I took a neuroscience class in undergrad." Oh, boy. That was probably two weeks ago. "I'm *pretty* sure they stimulated the medial temporal lobe."

I sigh. On the inside. "Who?"

"Something . . . Welch? In Chicago?"

"Jack Walsh? Northwestern?"

"Yeah."

I nod and smile. Though maybe I shouldn't smile. Maybe the reason I have to deal with this crap is that I smile too much. "Jack did not stimulate the hippocampus directly—he stimulated occipital areas connected to it."

"But in the paper—"

"Fred," Levi says. He's sitting back in his chair, dwarfing it, holding a half-eaten apple in his right hand. "I think we can take the word of a Ph.D.-trained neuroscientist with dozens of publications on this," he adds, calm but authoritative. Then he takes another bite of his apple, and that's the end of the conversation.

See? Sausage Referencing™. Works every time. And every time it makes me want to flip a table, but I just move on to the next topic. What

can I say? I'm tired.

And now I crave an apple.

My stomach growls when I slip out to fill my water bottle. I'm thinking wistfully of the Lean Cuisine currently unthawing at my desk when I hear it.

"Meow."

I recognize the chirpy quality of it immediately. It's my calico—well, *the* calico—peeking at me from behind the water fountain.

"Hey, sweetie." I go down on my knees to pet her. "Where did you go the other day?"

Chirp, meow. Some purrs.

"What are you doing all alone?"

A headbutt.

"Are you hunting mice? Do you work as *c*-law enforcement?" I laugh at my own pun. The cat gives me a scathing look and wanders away. "Oh, come on, it was a good joke. It was *hiss*-terical!"

One last indignant glare, and she turns the corner. I giggle, then hear steps coming up behind me. I don't look back. I don't need to, since I already know who it is. "There was a cat," I say weakly.

Levi walks past me to fill his water bottle. He's so tall, he needs to hunch over the fountain. His biceps shift under the cotton of his shirt. Was he this big in grad school? Or did I get even shorter? Maybe it's the stress. Maybe early onset osteoporosis is kicking in. Gotta buy some calcium-set tofu. "Right," he says, noncommittal. His eyes are on the water.

"No, for real."

"Uh-huh."

"I'm serious. She went that way." I point to my right. Levi looks in that direction with a polite nod and then walks back inside the room, sipping his water.

I stay on my knees in the dead middle of the hallway and sigh. I don't care if Levi Wardass believes me.

He probably hates cats anyway.

• • •

"EQUIPMENT'S READY. AND Guy set up our computers," Rocío says as we walk back to our apartments.

I smile into the soupy afternoon air. "Awesome. How was working with Guy and Kaylee?"

"How was working with your lifelong sworn archfoe?"

I give her the stink eye. "Ro." My time with her is perfect practice for the adolescent daughter I might never have.

"It was fine," she mutters. I frown at her tone.

"You sure?"

"Yeah."

"It doesn't sound fine. Is there a problem?"

"Yes. Several. Global warming, systemic racism, the overpopulation of ecological niches, the unnecessary American remake of Swedish romantic horror masterpiece *Let the Right One In*—"

"Rocío." I stop on the sidewalk. "If there's something off in the way you're being treated, if Guy's making you uncomfortable, please feel free to —"

"Have you *seen* Guy?" she scoffs. "He looks like the harmless love child of a meerkat and an altar boy."

"That is very rude and"—I blink—"disturbingly accurate, but it sounds like you had an unpleasant day, so if there's anything that bothers you, I—" She mutters something I can't hear. I lean closer. "What did you say?"

Another mumbled reply.

"What? I can't—"

"I said, *I hate Kaylee.*" She screams it so loud, a man pushing a stroller on the other side of the street turns to look at us.

"You hate . . . Kaylee?"

She whirls around and starts walking. "I said what I said." I hurry after her.

"Wait—are you serious?"

"I'm always serious."

She's not. "Did she do something to you?"

"Yes."

"Then tell me, please." I put my hand on her shoulder, trying to be reassuring. "I'm here for you, whatever it is—"

"Her stupid *curls*," Rocío spits out. "They look like a damn Fibonacci spiral. They're logarithmic, and their growth factor is the golden ratio—not to mention that they even *look* like spun gold. Is she Cinderella? Is this Disneyland Paris?"

I blink. "Ro, are you—"

"And what self-respecting person wears that much glitter? Unironically?"

"I like glitter—"

"*No, you don't*," she growls. I can only nod. Okay. Don't like glitter anymore. "And earlier she dropped something and you know what she said?"

"Oops?"

" 'Lordy.' She said, 'Oh, Lordy!'—do you understand *why* I cannot work with her?"

I nod to buy time. This is . . . interesting. At the very least. "I, um, understand that you two are very different and might never be friends, but I need you to overcome your . . . revulsion for sequins—"

"*Pink* sequins."

"—for *pink* sequins, and to get along with her."

"Impossible. I quit."

"Listen, none of these things are grounds for a formal complaint. We can't police our coworkers' sense of fashion."

Rocío frowns. "What if I told you that she had a lollipop? The kind with gum inside?"

"Still no." I smile. "Wanna know something? Everything you feel about Kaylee, Levi feels about me."

"What do you mean?"

"He hates my hair. My piercings. My clothes. I'm pretty sure he thinks my face is on par with a splatterpunk movie."

"Splatterpunk movies are the best."

"Somehow I don't think he'd agree. But he ignores the fact that I'm a total swamp hag so we can collaborate. And you should do the same."

Rocío resumes walking, morose. "Does he really hate the way you look?"

"Yep. Always did."

"It's strange, then."

"What's strange?"

"He stares at you. Plenty."

"Oh, no." I laugh. "He puts a lot of effort into *not* staring at me. It's his CrossFit."

"It's the opposite. At least when you're not looking." I'm about to ask her if she's high, but she shrugs. "Whatever. If you won't support me in my hatred for Kaylee I have no choice but to call Alex and rage at him while I listen to Norwegian death metal."

I pat her back. "Sounds like the loveliest of evenings."

At home, I just want to stuff my face with peanut butter cups and send twelve @WhatWouldMarieDo tweets about the injustice of Sausage Referencing™, but I limit myself to checking my DMs. I smile when I find one from Shmac:

SHMAC: How are things?

MARIE: Weirdly, much better.

SHMAC: Did camel dick burst into flames?

MARIE: Lol, no. I do think he might be less of a camel dick than I thought. Still a dick, don't get me wrong. But maybe not camel. Maybe he's like, idk, a duck dick?

SHMAC: Have you ever seen a duck dick?

MARIE: No? But they're small and cute, right?

I watch the wheel spin as the picture he sends me loads. I initially think it's a corkscrew. Then I realize that it's attached to a little feathered body and—

MARIE: OMG WHAT IS THAT ABOMINATION

SHMAC: Your colleague.

MARIE: I take it back! I un-demote him! He's a camel dick again!

MARIE: How's your girlfriend?

SHMAC: Yet again: I wish.

MARIE: How are things with her?

There's a long pause after, in which I decide to act like the motivated adult that I'm not and put on running shorts and my *Marie Curie & The Isotopes—European Tour 1911* T-shirt.

SHMAC: A mess.

MARIE: How come?

SHMAC: I fucked things up.

MARIE: Beyond repair?

SHMAC: I think so. There's a lot of history here.

MARIE: Want to tell me?

The three dots at the base of the screen bounce for a while, so I check my Couch-to-5K app. Looks like today I need to run five minutes, walk one

minute, and then run five more minutes. Sounds feasible.

Oh, who am I kidding? It sounds *harrowing*.

SHMAC: It's complicated. Part of it is that I first met her when I was younger.

MARIE: Please don't tell me you have a secret stemlord past.

SHMAC: I have an asshole past.

MARIE: How many ladies have you harassed on the internet?

SHMAC: Zero. But I did grow up in a hostile, uncommunicative environment. I was an uncommunicative person before I realized that I couldn't spend the rest of my life like that. I got therapy, which helped me figure out how to deal with feelings that are . . . overwhelming. Except every time I talk to her my brain blanks and I become the person I used to be.

MARIE: Ouch.

SHMAC: I never suspected how some of my actions came across, but in hindsight they make complete sense. Still, something she said makes me wonder if her husband told her some lies that aggravated the situation.

MARIE: You should tell her. If it were me, I'd want to know.

SHMAC: In the end it doesn't matter. She's happy with him.

I take a deep breath.

MARIE: Okay, listen. For years I thought that I was happy in a relationship with someone who turned out to be a chronic liar. And in my experience relationships that are based on lies can't last. Not in the long term. You'd be doing her a favor, if you came clean.

I don't mention to him that *all* relationships can't last. People tend to get defensive when I do. They have to figure it out on their own.

SHMAC: I'm sorry that happened to you.

MARIE: I'm sorry this is happening to you.

SHMAC: Look at us. Two sorry scientists.

MARIE: Is there any other kind?

SHMAC: Not that I know of.

My heart hurts for Shmac as I put on my sneakers. I can't even imagine how awful it must be, to be in love with a married person. Heartbreaking situations like this vindicate the corporate mission of Bee, Inc.: keep up the Bee-fence. Never, *ever* fall for someone. If my heart gets broken again, neuroscience will be the one. It's sure to do a much cleaner job than stupid Tim, anyway. Doctor Curie would support me in this decision, I'm positive.

I spring up from the couch and venture out into the soup-like Houston air for my run.

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IF I RUN at the Space Center, someone I know might see me crawl my way about, and I wouldn't wish that sight upon an innocent bystander. Google comes to my aid: there's a little cemetery about five minutes away. Reading baby names like Alford or Brockholst on gravestones might be a nice distraction from the gut-wrenching torment of exercising. I slip in my AirPods, start an Alanis Morissette album, and head that way. It's 6:43, which means that I can be home and showered in time to watch *Love Island*.

Don't judge. It's an underrated show.

Disappointingly, sitting on the couch thinking about working out has *not* improved my aerobic fitness. I realize it on minute three of my run, when I collapse in front of the tombstone of Noah F. Moore (surprisingly fitting), 1834–1902. I lie in the grass drenched in sweat, listening to my heart pound in my ears. Or maybe it's just Alanis screaming.

I'm not meant for this. And by "this" I mean using my body for anything more strenuous than reaching for my treat cupboard. Which, incidentally, is *all* my cupboards. Yes, okay: Dr. Curie bonded with her husband over their shared love of cycling and nature walks, but we can't all be like her: gentlewoman, scholar, *and* athlete.

When I notice that the sun is setting, I scrape myself off the ground, bid farewell to Noah, and start hobbling home. I'm almost back at the entrance when I notice something: there is *no* entrance. The tall gates I ran through on my way here are now closed. I try to shake them open, but no dice. I look around. The walls are too high for me to climb—because I'm five feet tall and *everything* is too high for me to climb.

I take a deep breath. This is okay. It's fine. I'm not stuck in here. If I follow the walls I'll find a shorter segment I can easily climb over.

Or not. I definitely haven't found one fifteen minutes later, when Houston's firmly in dusk territory and I have to turn on my flashlight app to see a few feet away from me. I sum up the situation in my head: I'm alone (sorry, Noah, you don't count), stuck in a cemetery after sundown, and my phone is at 20 percent. Oops.

I feel a wave of panic swell and immediately leash it. No. Down. *Bad* panic. No treats for you. I need to engage in some goal-oriented problem-solving before I can wallow in despair. What can I do?

I could yell and hope someone hears me, but what could they do? Build a makeshift rope with their belts? Hmm. Seems like a traumatic brain injury waiting to happen. Pass.

I could call 911, then. Though 911 is probably busy saving people who actually deserve to be saved. People who didn't moronically get themselves locked inside a cemetery at night. Calling someone I know would be better. I could *ask* someone to bring me a ladder. Yes, that sounds good.

I have the phone numbers of two people who currently live in Houston. The second doesn't count, because I'll sleep cradled by the slimy arms of Noah's skeleton before calling it. But that's okay, because the first is Rocío, who could ask the super for a ladder and drive here in our rental. Let's be real: cemeteries at night are her natural habitat. She'll love this immensely.

If only she bothered to answer her phone. I call her once, twice. Seven times. Then I remember that Gen Zs would rather roll around in nettles than talk on the phone, and I text her. No answer. My stupid battery is at 18 percent, mosquitos are sucking blood out of my shins, and Rocío is probably having Skype sex to a band called Thorr's Hammer.

Who else can I call? How long would it take Reike to fly here? Is it too late to ask her for the number of nose-tongue guy? What are the chances that Shmac secretly lives in Houston? Should I email Guy? But he has a kid. He might not check his email at night.

My phone is at 12 percent, and my eyes fall on the 832 number in my incoming call log. I haven't even bothered saving it. Because I thought I'd never use it.

I can't. I can't. I can't call Levi. He's probably at home, having a Stepford dinner with his wife, playing with his dog, helping his daughter with math homework. Penny of the black curls. No. I can't. He'd hate me even more. And the humiliation. He's already saved me once.

Nine percent, the world is pitch black, and I hate myself. There's no alternative. I have successfully defended a Ph.D. dissertation, overcome a

depressive episode, gotten my chuncha fully waxed every month for years, and yet tapping once on Levi's number feels like the hardest thing I've ever done. Maybe I should just settle in for the night. Maybe a pack of bobcats will let me snuggle in their pile. Maybe—

"Yes?"

Oh, shit. He answered. Why did he answer? He's a millennial; we also hate talking on the—

"Hello?"

"Um, sorry. This is Bee. Königswasser. We, um, work together? At NASA?"

A pause. "I know who you are, Bee."

"Right. Yes. So . . ." I close my eyes. "I am having a bit of a problem and I was wondering if you could—"

He doesn't hesitate. "Where are you?"

"See, I'm in this little cemetery by the Space Center. Greenwood?"

"Greenforest. Are you locked in?"

"I— How do you know?"

"You're calling me from a cemetery after sundown. Cemeteries close at sundown."

That would have been a useful piece of information forty-five minutes ago. "Yeah, so . . . the walls are sort of tall, and my phone is sort of dying, and I'm sort of—"

"Go stand by the gates. Turn off the flashlight if you have it on. Don't talk to anyone you don't know. I'll be there in ten minutes." A beat. "I've got you. Don't worry, okay?"

He hangs up before I can tell him to bring a ladder. And, come to think of it, before I can ask him to come rescue me.

9

MEDIAL FRONTAL CORTEX: MAYBE I WAS WRONG?

THE SECOND LEVI appears I want to kiss him for rescuing me from the mosquitos, and the ghosts, and the ghosts of the mosquitos. I also want to kill him for witnessing the extent of the humiliation of Bee Königswasser, human disaster. What can I say? I contain multitudes.

He steps out of an oil-guzzling truck that I sadly have no right to complain about anymore, surveys the wall, and comes to stand on the other side of the gate. To his credit, if he's smirking he's doing it on the inside. His expression is neutral when he asks, "You okay?"

Does thoroughly mortified count as okay? Let's say: "Yeah."

"Good. This is what we're going to do: I'll slide in the ladder through the gates, and you'll use it to get on top of the wall. I'll be on the other side to catch you."

I frown. He sounds very . . . in charge. Self-assured. Not that he usually doesn't, but it's having a new . . . effect on me. Oh my God. Am I a damsel in distress?

"How will we retrieve the ladder?"

"I'll drive by tomorrow morning and pick it up."

"What if someone steals it?"

“I’ll have lost a precious heirloom passed down my family for generations.”

“Really?”

“No. Ready?”

I’m not, but it doesn’t matter. He lifts the ladder like it’s a feather and slides it through the gate. It feels a little less-than-cool when I find that it’s so heavy, I can barely hold it upright. I tell myself that I have other talents as he has to patiently guide me through the process of releasing the catches and setting the safety mechanism. He must notice how annoying I find being coached, because he says, “At least you know about the angular gyrus.”

I turn to hiss at him, but stop when I see his expression. Is he teasing me *again*? For the *second* time? In *a day*?

Whatever. I climb up, which proves to be a nice distraction. Because you know how I mentioned that my body likes to faint? Well. Heights make it like to faint *even more*. I’m halfway to the top, and my head starts spinning. I clutch the sidebars and take a deep breath. I can do this. I can maintain normal blood pressure without passing out. I’m not even that high up. Here, if I look down I can—

“Don’t,” Levi orders.

I turn to him. I’m a few inches taller, and he looks even more handsome from this angle. God, I hate him. And myself. “Don’t what?”

“Don’t look down. It’ll be worse.”

How does he even know that—

“Look up. Take one step after the other, slowly. Yes, good.” I don’t know if his advice works, or if my blood pressure naturally spikes when I’m told what to do, but I make it to the top without crumpling like a sack of potatoes. At which point I realize that the worst is yet ahead. “Just lower yourself from the edge,” Levi says. He’s standing right below me, arms raised to catch me, his head a few inches from my dangling feet.

“Jesus.” Forget fainting. I’m about to barf. “What if you don’t catch me? What if I’m too heavy? What if we both fall? What if I break your neck?”

“I will, you’re obviously not, we won’t, and you won’t. Come on, Bee,” he says patiently. “Just close your eyes.”

See? This is what you get yourself into when you work out. Stay in the safe harbor of your couch, kids.

“You ready?” he asks encouragingly. Trust falls. With Levi Wardass. God, when did this become my life? Dr. Curie, please watch out for me.

I let myself go. For a second I’m suspended in air, sure that I’ll splatter Humpty-Dumpty style. Then strong fingers close around my waist, and I’m in Levi’s arms for the second time in ten days. I must have pushed from the wall a little too forcefully, because we end up closer than I intended. My front rubs against him as he lowers me to the ground, and I feel everything. *Everything*. The hard muscles of his shoulders under my hands. The heat of his flesh through the shirt. The way his belt bites into my abdomen. The dangerous tingling in my lower belly as he— What? *No*.

I step back. This is Levi Ward. A married man. A father. A camel dick. What am I even thinking?

“Are you okay?”

I nod, flustered. “Thank you for getting here so quickly.”

He looks away. He may be flushing. “You’re welcome.”

“I’m so sorry to disrupt your evening. I tried to call Rocío, but she was . . . I’m not sure where.”

“I’m glad you called me.”

Is he? I seriously doubt it. “Anyway, thank you so much. How can I return the favor? Can I pay for gas?”

He shakes his head. “I’ll drive you home.”

“Oh, there’s no need. I’m just five minutes away.”

“It’s pitch black and there are no sidewalks.” He holds the passenger door open, and I have no choice but to get in. Whatever. I can survive one more minute in close proximity with him.

The inside of his truck is pristine *and* smells good—not something I believed possible—with a handful of Lärabars in the back that make my stomach cramp with hunger, and a half-full CamelBak that I’d risk his germs for. He also drives a stick shift. Hmph. Show-off.

"You're staying at the lodging facilities, right?"

I nod, pulling at the hem of my shorts. I don't like how high they ride when I sit. Not that Levi would ever voluntarily look at my thighs, but I'm a bit self-conscious, since Tim used to make fun of me for being bowlegged. And Annie would defend me, growl at him that my legs were perfect and his opinion was unnecessary, and I would—

The truck starts. A familiar voice fills the cabin, but Levi quickly switches to NPR. I blink. The anchor is talking about mail-in ballots. "Was that . . . Pearl Jam?"

"Yeah."

"*Vitalogy*?"

"Yep."

Humph. Pearl Jam's not my favorite, but it's good, and I hate that Levi likes good music. I need him to love Dave Matthews Band. To stan the Insane Clown Posse. To have a Nickelback tramp stamp. It's what I deserve.

"What were you doing in a cemetery?" he asks.

"Just . . . running."

"You run?" He sounds surprised. Offensively so.

"Hey, I know I look like a wimp, but—"

"You don't," he interjects. "Look like a wimp, I mean. Just, in grad school you . . ."

I turn to him. The corner of his mouth is curving upward. "I what?"

"Once you said that time spent working out is time one never gets back."

I have no memories of saying that. Especially to Levi, since we exchanged approximately twelve words at Pitt. Though it *does* sound like something I'd say. "As it turns out, the higher your aerobic fitness, the healthier your hippocampus. Not to mention the overall connectivity of your Default Mode Network and multiple axon bundles, so . . ." I shrug. "I find myself resentfully acknowledging that according to science, exercise is a good thing." He chuckles. Crow's-feet crinkle the corners of his eyes, and

it makes me want to continue. Not that I care about making him laugh. Why would I? "I'm doing this Couch-to-5K program, but . . . ew."

"Ew?"

"Ew."

His smile widens a millimeter. "How long's the program?"

"Four weeks."

"How long have you been on it?"

"Couple weeks."

"What distance are you up to?"

". . . Point two miles. I hit the wall. On, um, minute three." He gives me a skeptical glance. "To be fair, this is only my second time running since I was in middle school."

"The heat here is terrible. You might want to run in the morning. But you're not a morning person, right?" He bites his lip pensively. I wonder how he could possibly know that, and realize that sadly, one needs only to take a look at me before eleven a.m. "There's a gym in the Space Center you should have access to."

"I checked. It's not free for contractors, and I'm not sure the health of my nervous system is worth seventy bucks a month." Ari Shapiro is asking a correspondent about some Facebook lawsuit. "You run 5Ks?" I ask.

"No."

My eyes narrow. "Is it because you only run marathons and above?"

"I . . ." He hesitates, looking sheepish. "I run half marathons, sometimes."

"Well, then," I say conversationally as he pulls into the parking lot, "thank you very much for the rescue and the ride, but I need to be alone so I can hate you in peace now."

He laughs again. Why does it sound so nice? "Hey, I struggle with running, too."

I'm sure he does. Around mile thirty-four or so. "Well, thanks. It's the second time you saved me." *Despite the fact that we're nemeses.* Outstanding, huh?

"The second?"

“Yeah.” I release the seat belt. “The other time was at work. When I was almost . . . pancaked?”

“Ah.” Something jumps in his jaw at the mention. “Yeah.”

“Well, have a great night.” I pat my pockets. “Apologies for—” I pat some more. Then I twist around in the seat, inspect it for something that might have slipped out, and find nothing. It’s as pristine as when I got in. “Uh . . .”

“What’s going on?”

“I—” I close my eyes, trying to remember my day. I put on shorts. Put my keys into the pocket. Felt them bounce against my leg while I was running, up until . . . Shit. I think they fell out when I collapsed on the grave. “Damn you, Noah Moore,” I mutter.

“What?”

“I think I left my keys in the cemetery.” I groan. “Shit, the super leaves at seven.” Jesus, what’s wrong with this day? I bite my lower lip, rifling through options. I could sleep on Rocío’s couch and go pick up my keys first thing in the morning. Of course, I’m not sure where Rocío is, or whether she’ll come to the door. The fact that my phone is at 4 percent does not—

I startle when Levi starts the truck again. “Oh, thanks, but there’s no need to go back to the cemetery. I wouldn’t know how to get in, and—”

“I’m not taking you to the cemetery.” He’s not looking at me. “Fasten your seat belt.”

“What?”

“Fasten your seat belt,” he repeats.

I do, confused. “Where are we going?”

“Home.”

“Whose home?”

“My home.”

My jaw drops. I must have misheard. “What?”

“You need a place to stay, no?”

“Yeah, but—Rocío’s couch. Or I’ll call a locksmith. I can’t come to your house.”

“Why?”

“Because,” I say, sounding like a shrill twelve-year-old. Why is he being so nice all of a sudden? Does he feel guilty for not telling me about the NASA mess? Well, he should. But I’d rather sleep under a bridge and eat plankton than go to his place and see his perfect family life. Nothing personal, but the envy would gut me. And I can’t meet his wife smelling like dirty socks and graveyard. Who knows what Levi already told her about me? “You probably have plans for the evening.”

“I don’t.”

“And I’d put you out.”

“You wouldn’t.”

“Plus, you hate me.”

He briefly closes his eyes in exasperation, which worries me. He’s driving, after all. “Is there any nonimaginary reason you don’t want to stay at my place, Bee?” he asks with a sigh.

“I . . . It’s very nice of you to offer, but I don’t feel comfortable.”

That gets through to him. His hands tighten on the wheel and he says calmly, “If you don’t feel safe around me, I absolutely respect that. I’ll drive you back to your place. But I’m not going to leave until I’m sure that you have a secure place to—”

“What? No. I feel safe around you.” As I say it, I realize how true it is, and how rare for me. There’s often a constant undercurrent of threat when I’m alone with men I don’t know very well. The other night Guy came by my office to chat, and even though he’s never been anything but nice, I couldn’t stop glancing at the door. But Levi’s different, which is odd, especially considering that our interactions have always been antagonistic. And especially considering that he’s built like a Victorian mansion. “It’s not that.”

“Then . . . ?”

I close my eyes and let my head fall back against the headrest. There’s no way I’m going to be able to avoid this, is there? Might as well lean in to the clusterfuck.

“Then, thank you,” I say, trying not to sound as dejected as I feel. “I’d love to stay with you tonight, if it’s not too much trouble.”

• • •

THE SECOND I see Levi’s house I want to burn it down with a flamethrower. Because it’s perfect.

To be fair, it’s a totally normal house. But it perfectly matches my ideal, which, to be fair again, is not particularly lofty. My lifelong dream is a pretty brick home in the suburbs, a family with two point five children, and a yard to grow butterfly-friendly plants. I’m pretty sure a psychoanalyst would say that it has to do with the nomadic lifestyle of my formative years. I’m a stability slut, what can I say?

Of course, when I say “lifelong dream” I mean until a couple of years ago. Once I realized how life-alteringly cruel humans can be, I scrapped the family part from the dream. The house lingers, though, at least according to the pang in my heart when Levi pulls up the driveway. First thing I notice: he grows hummingbird mint in his garden—nature’s hummingbird feeder, and my favorite plant. Grrr. Second: there are no cars in the driveway. Weird. But some lights inside are on, so maybe his wife’s is just in the garage. Yeah, that’s probably it.

I jump out of the truck—which is unjustly tall—with already-sore muscles and already-itchy legs. “Are you sure this is okay?”

He gives me a silent look that seems to mean *Haven’t we been over this seven times already?* and leads me up his driveway, where we’re surrounded by a delightful amount of fireflies. I’m *explosively* jealous of this place. And I’m about to meet Levi’s significant other, who probably has a nickname for me, her husband’s ugly former lab mate. Something like FrankenBee. Or Beezilla. Wait, those nicknames are actually pretty cute. I hope for their sake that they came up with something meaner.

The inside of the house is silent, and I wonder if the family is already asleep. “Should I be quiet?” I whisper.

He gives me a puzzled look. “If you want,” he says at regular volume. Maybe the walls are soundproof?

Either Levi is a very strict dad, or he and his wife are pros at picking up after their kid. The house is immaculate and sparsely furnished, no toys or clutter in sight. There are some engineering journals, a handful of sci-fi posters on the walls, and an open Asimov book on the coffee table—one of my favorite authors. How is this man I hate surrounded by everything I love? It’s the ultimate mindfuck.

“There are three unused bedrooms upstairs. You can pick the one you like best.” *Three* unused bedrooms? How big is this house? “One’s technically my office, but the couch pulls out. Do you want to shower?”

“Shower?”

“I didn’t mean to—” He looks flustered. “If you want to. Because you ran. You don’t have to. I don’t mean to imply that—”

“That I smell like the sweaty crotch of a trout?”

“Uh . . .”

“That I’m as dirty as a gas station restroom?”

He’s *definitely* flustered, and I laugh. The blush makes him almost endearing. “Don’t worry. I smell gross and I’d love a shower.”

He swallows and nods. “You’ll have to use my en suite. Soap and towels are in there.”

But isn’t his wife—?

“I can wash and dry your clothes if you want. Give you something of mine in the meantime. Though I don’t have anything that will fit. You’re very . . .” He clears his throat. “Small.”

Wait a minute—is he divorced? Is that why he doesn’t wear a ring? But then he wouldn’t have pics of his wife in his office, would he? Oh my God, is she dead? No, Guy would have told me. Or would he?

“You have an iPhone, right?” He exits the living room and comes back holding out a charger. “Here you go.”

I don’t take it. I just stare up at his irritatingly handsome face, and—God, this is driving me *nuts*. “Listen,” I say, perhaps more aggressively than

I should, “I know it’s rude, but I’m too weirded out not to, so I’m just going to ask you right out.” I take a deep breath. “*Where* is your family?”

He shrugs, still holding out the charger. “It’s not rude. My parents are in Dallas. My eldest brother lives on the Air Force base in Vegas, and the other recently deployed to Belgium—”

“Not *that* family. Your *other* family.”

His head tilts. “Does my father have a secret family you want to tell me about, or . . . ?”

“No. Your kid, where is she?”

“My what?” He squints at me.

“There’s a picture of her in your office,” I say weakly. “And Guy told me you two babysit together.”

“Ah.” He shakes his head with a smile. “Penny’s not my kid. But she gave me that picture. She made the frame in school.”

She’s not his— *Oh*. “You’re with her mother, then?”

“No. Lily and I dated briefly ages ago, but now we’re friends. She’s a teacher, and a single mother for the past year. Sometimes I’ll watch Penny for her, or drop her off at school if she’s running late. Stuff like that.”

Oh. “Oh.” Boy, do I love feeling like an idiot. “So you live . . . alone?”

He nods. And then his eyes widen and he takes a step back. “Oh. I see.”

“See what?”

“Why you asked. I’m sorry, I didn’t even think that you might feel unsafe sleeping here if it’s just the two of us. I will—”

“Oh, no.” I take a step forward to reassure him. “I asked because I was curious. Honestly, it seemed incredibly weird to me that you—” I realize what I’m about to say and snap my jaw shut before I continue. Levi’s not fooled.

“Were you shocked that someone would marry me?” he asks, biting back a smile.

Yup. “Not at all! You’re smart. And, um, tall. Still have all your hair. And I’m sure that with women you don’t hate you’re nicer than you have historically been with me!”

“Bee, I don’t—” He exhales hard. “Get in the truck.”

"Why?"

"I'm driving you back to the cemetery and feeding you to the coyotes."

"*Historically*," I hurry to say. "You've been nice to me today! You saved me from a zombie attack, for sure. And from Fred and Mark!"

He frowns. "I'm not sure what's wrong with them."

"Lots of misogyny's my guess." I debate whether continuing. Then I think: fuck it. "Also, it doesn't help that your team is exclusively male and almost exclusively white."

I expect him to contradict me. Instead he says, "You're right. It's appalling."

"You chose the members."

He shakes his head. "I inherited the team from my predecessor."

"Oh?"

"The only new hire I made was Kaylee." He sighs. "I officially reprimanded Mark. His behavior today is in his file. And I called a team meeting this afternoon, in which I reiterated that you are co-leader and that what you say goes. If anything like today ever happens again, let me know. I'll deal with it. Come, I'll find you something to wear."

I'm a little shell-shocked that he called a meeting to officially Sausage Reference™ me, so I follow him without questions. The upstairs area is just as pretty as the first floor, but with more personality. I spot a vinyl player and CDs, pictures on the walls, even some Pitt swag I recognize from my own apartment. His bedroom, though . . . his bedroom is magic. Something out of a catalog. It's a corner room with two large windows, wooden furniture, ceiling-high bookshelves, and, in the middle of the king-sized bed, sleeping softly on top of the comforter . . .

"Are you allergic to cats?" he asks, rummaging through a drawer.

I shake my head, then remember that he's not looking at me. "No."

"Schrödinger's probably going to leave you alone, anyway. He's old and grumpy."

Schrödinger! "I thought you hated cats."

He turns with a confused look. "Why?"

"I don't know. You seemed a bit hostile toward *my* cat today."

“You mean, your cat that doesn’t exist?”

“Félicette exists! I have literally wiped boogers from her eyes, so—”

“Félicette?”

I press my lips together. “It’s the name of the first cat in space.”

He lifts one eyebrow. “And you named your imaginary cat after her. I see.”

I roll my eyes and drop the topic. There’s nothing I want more than to pet the black ball of fur curled on the bed, but Levi’s holding out a white V-neck T-shirt and . . .

“How offended would you be if I offered you boxers a friend gave me as a joke? They’re very small, I don’t think I’ve ever worn them.”

“Is that . . . flamingoes?”

His cheeks redden. “The size isn’t the only reason I never wear them. Also, you might want this.” It’s a tube of itch-relief cream.

“Thanks. How did you know?”

He shrugs, still a little flushed. “You’ve been scratching your legs a lot.”

“Yeah, bugs love me.” I roll my eyes. “My ex used to say that he only kept me around as a decoy for mosquitos.” Looking back to Tim’s behaviors, it probably wasn’t even a joke.

Ten minutes later I make my way downstairs, hair wet and pine scented, reflecting that out of all the implausible roller coasters of events that have befallen me in the past weeks, the weirdest is knowing that Levi and I use the same deodorant. What can I say? Men’s products are cheaper, smell better, and block my BO more effectively. Not sure how I feel about the fact that Levi’s armpits and mine have similar needs, but I’m going to let that slide.

The kitchen, which is cozy and surprisingly well-equipped, smells like the most delicious meal I’ve never had. Levi works at the stove, his back to me, and I’m reasonably sure that he’s wearing the same shirt I have on in a different color. Except that it fits him perfectly. On me it looks like a circus tent.

“Food will be . . .” he starts, and then stops when he turns around and sees me in the room.

I grab two fistfuls of my shirt and pretend to curtsy. “Thank you for this gown, my good sir.”

“You’re . . .” He sounds hoarse. “You’re welcome. Food will be ready in five minutes.”

I wince as he turns back to the pans and pots. There’s no way he cooked without meat and dairy. God, why is he being so damn nice? “Thank you, but . . .” I pad to the stove. He’s making tacos. Ugh. I love tacos. “You didn’t have to.”

“I was going to make myself dinner anyway.”

“It’s really kind of you to offer, but I doubt I can eat . . .” I stop when my eyes fall to the filling. It’s not meat, but portobello mushrooms. Beside a jar of dairy-free sour cream, and a bag of shredded plant-based cheddar.

My eyes narrow. On impulse, I push on my toes and open the cabinet closest to me. I find quinoa, agar powder, and maple syrup. In the next one there are nuts, seeds, a package of dates. I scowl harder and move to the fridge, which looks like a richer, better version of mine. Almond milk, tofu, fruits and vegetables, coconut-based yogurts, miso paste. Oh my God.

Oh. My. God.

“He’s a vegan,” I mutter to myself.

“He is.”

I look up. Levi is staring at me with a puzzled, patient expression, and I have no idea how to tell him that this is, like, the *tenth* thing we have in common. Sci-fi and cats and science and obviously men’s deodorants and who knows what else. It’s so incredibly upsetting to *me*, I can’t even imagine how much *he’d* hate it if he knew. I toy with the idea of telling him, but he doesn’t deserve it. He’s been very nice today. Instead I just clear my throat. “Um, me too.”

“I figured. When you . . . scolded me. About the donut.”

“Oh, *God*. I’d forgotten about that.” I bury my face in my hands. “I’m sorry. So sorry. Believe it or not, I’m usually not a deranged asshole who scares her colleagues away from plant-based products.”

“It’s fine.”

I massage my temple. “In my defense, you drive the least environmentally friendly vehicle.”

“It’s a Ford F-150. Pretty friendly, actually.”

“Is it?” I wince. “Well, in *another* defense of mine, weren’t you a hunter back in grad school?”

His shoulders stiffen imperceptibly. “My entire family hunts, and I’ve gone on more hunting trips than I’d have liked as a teen. Before I could say no.”

“That sounds awful.” He shrugs, but it looks a little forced. “Okay. I guess I have no defense at all. I’m just an asshole.”

He smiles. “I didn’t know you were a vegan, either. I remember Tim bringing you meat lunches back at Pitt.”

“Yeah.” I roll my eyes. “Tim was of the school of thought that I was being stubborn and that a taste of meat would convert me back to a regular diet.” I laugh at Levi’s appalled expression. “Yeah. He’d sneak non-vegan stuff into my food all the time. He was *the worst* back then. Anyway, how long have you been a vegan?”

“Twenty years, give or take.”

“Ooh. Which animal was it for you?”

He knows exactly what I mean. “A goat. In a cheese commercial. She looked so . . . cogent.”

I nod somberly. “It must have been very emotional.”

“Sure was for my parents. We fought over whether white meat is really meat for the better part of a decade.” He hands me a plate, gesturing for me to fill it. “What about you?”

“A chicken. Really cute. He’d sometimes sit next to me and lean against my side. Until . . . yeah.”

He sighs. “Yeah.”

Five minutes later, sitting in a breakfast nook I’d literally give my pinkie to own, plates full of delicious food and imported beer in front of us, something occurs to me: I’ve been here for one hour and I haven’t felt uneasy—not once. I was fully ready to spend the night pretending to be in

my happy place (with Dr. Curie under a blooming cherry tree in Nara, Japan), but Levi has made things weirdly . . . easy for me.

"Hey," I say before he can take a bite of his tacos, "thank you for today. It can't be easy, to be so welcoming to someone you don't particularly get along with or like, or to have them stay in your house."

He closes his eyes, like every other time I mention the obvious fact that there's no love lost between us (he is surprisingly truth-averse). But when he opens them, he holds my gaze. "You're right. It's not easy. But not for any reason you think."

I frown, meaning to ask him what exactly he means by that, but he beats me to it.

"Eat up, Bee," he orders gently.

I'm starving, so I do just that.

10

DORSOLATERAL PREFRONTAL CORTEX: UNTRUTHS

"I'M GOING TO switch off your speech center, now."

Guy looks up from under his eyelashes with a defeated sigh. "Man, I hate it when people do that."

I laugh. Guy's the third astronaut I've tested this morning. He works on BLINK, so we weren't originally planning to map his brain, but someone pulled out of the pilot group last minute. Brain stimulation is tricky business: it's complicated to predict how neurons will respond, and even harder in people who have a history of epilepsy or electric misfiring. Just drinking a cup of strong coffee can mess up brain chemistry enough to make a well-consolidated stimulation protocol dangerous. When we found out that one of the astronauts we selected had a history of seizures, we decided to give his spot to Guy. Guy was *ecstatic*.

"I'm going to target your Broca's area," I tell him.

"Ah, yes. The famed Broca's area." He nods knowingly.

I smile. "That would be your left posterior-inferior frontal gyrus. I'll stimulate it with trains up to twenty-five hertz."

"Without even buying me dinner first?" He clucks his tongue.

"To see whether it's working, I'll need you to talk. You can recite a poem, free-style it, doesn't matter." The other astronauts I tested today

chose a Shakespeare sonnet and the Pledge of Allegiance.

"Whatever I want?"

I position the stimulation coil one inch from his ear. "Yep."

"Very well, then." He clears his throat. "*My loneliness is killing me and I, I must confess I still believe—*"

I laugh, like everyone else in the room. Including Levi, who appears to be fairly close to Guy. It speaks highly of him (Guy, not Levi; I refuse to speak highly of Levi), considering he probably should have been BLINK's leader. Guy doesn't seem to mind, at least judging by the chummy chat they had over some sportsball game's lineup while I was setting up my equipment.

"*. . . my loneliness is killing me and I, I must c—*" Guy frowns. "Sorry, *I must c—*" He frowns harder. "*Must c—*" he sputters one last time, blinking fast. I turn to Rocío, who's taking notes. "Speech arrest at MNI coordinates minus thirty-eight, sixteen, fifty."

The ensuing applause is unnecessary, but a tiny bit welcome. Earlier this morning, when the entire engineering team dragged their feet to the neurostimulation lab to observe my first brain mapping session, it was obvious that they'd rather be pretty much anywhere else. It was equally obvious that Levi had instructed them not to say so much as a peep about their total lack of interest.

They're good guys. They *tried* to fake it. Sadly, there's a reason that in high school, engineers tend to gravitate toward the robotics shop instead of drama club.

Thankfully, neuroscience has a way of defending her own honor. I just had to pick up my coil and show a few tricks. With stimulation at the right spot and frequency, decorated astronauts with IQs well into the triple digits and drawers full of graduate diplomas can temporarily forget how to count ("Woah! Is that for real?"), or move their fingers ("Freaky!"), or recognize the faces of people they work with every day ("Bee, how are you even doing that?"), and, of course, how to speak ("This is the coolest thing I've ever seen in my entire damn life."). Brain stimulation kicks ass, and anyone who says otherwise shall know her wrath. Which is why the lab is still

crammed. The engineers were supposed to leave after the first demonstration but decided to stick around . . . indefinitely, it seems.

It's nice to convert a bunch of skeptics to the wonders of neuroscience. I wonder if Dr. Curie felt the same when she shared her love for ionizing radiation. Of course in her case, long-term unshielded exposure to unstable isotopes eventually led to chronic aplastic anemia and death in a sanatorium, but . . . you get my point. Which is that when I say, "I think I got all I need from Guy. We're done for today," the room erupts into a disappointed groan. Levi and I exchange an amused look.

To be clear: we're not friends or anything. One dinner together, one night sleeping in a room that happens to contain three-quarters of my favorite books, and one yawny car ride to Noah Moore's grave, during which he politely respected that I'm not a morning person and remained blissfully quiet, did *not* make Levi and me friends. We still dislike each other, rue the day we met, wish the pox on the other's house, etc., etc. But it's like last week, over vegan tacos, we managed to form an uneasy, rudimentary alliance. I help him do his thing, and he helps me do mine.

It almost feels like we're actually collaborating. Crazy, huh?

For lunch, I heat up my ever-so-sad Lean Cuisine, grab a stack of academic articles I've been meaning to read, and make my way to the picnic tables behind the building. I've been nibbling on chickpeas for about five minutes when I hear a familiar voice.

"Bee!" Guy and Levi are walking toward me, holding paper cups and sandwich bags. "Mind if we join you?" Guy asks.

I do a little, since this paper on electrotherapy isn't going to read itself, but I shake my head. I shoot Levi an apologetic look (*Sorry you're stuck eating with me because Guy doesn't know that we're archenemies*), but he doesn't seem to get it and takes a seat across from me, smiling faintly as though he doesn't mind. I watch the play of muscles under his shirt, and a frisson of warmth licks down my spine.

Hmm. Weird.

Guy sits next to me with a grin, and I think to myself, not for the first time, that he's wholesome, charming, and truly a Cute Guy™.

This is incredibly objectifying and reductive, and if you tell anyone I'll flatly deny it, but back in grad school Annie told me that there are three types of attractive men. I don't know if she came up with this taxonomy herself, if Aphrodite announced it to her in a dream, or if she stole it from *Teen Vogue*, but here they are:

There is the cute type, which consists of guys who are attractive in a nonthreatening, accessible way, as a combination of their nice looks and captivating personalities. Tim falls into this group, just like Guy and most male scientists—including, I suspect, Pierre Curie. Come to think of it, all the guys who ever hit on me do, perhaps because I'm small, and dress quirky, and try to be friendly. If I were a dude, I'd be a Cute Guy™; Cute Guys™ recognize that at some elemental level, and they make passes at me.

Then there's the handsome type. According to Annie, this category is a bit of a waste. The Handsome Guy™ has the kind of face you see in movie trailers and perfume ads, geometrically perfect and objectively amazing, but there's something inaccessible about him. Those guys are so dreamy, they're almost abstract. They need something to anchor them to reality—a personality quirk, a flaw, a circumscribed interest—otherwise they'll float away in a bubble of boredom. Of course, society doesn't exactly encourage Handsome Guys™ to develop brilliant personalities, so I tend to concur with Annie: they're useless.

Last but not least, the Sexy Guys™. Annie would go on and on about how Levi is the epitome of the Sexy Guy™, but I'd like to formally object. In fact, I don't even acknowledge the existence of this category. It's preposterous, the idea that there are men you can't help yourself from being attracted to. Men who give you the tingles, men you can't stop thinking about, men who pop up in your brain like flashes of light after stimulation of the occipital cortex. Men who are physical, elemental, primordial. Masculine. Present. Solid. Sounds fake, right?

"Hit me," Guy tells me with a Cute Guy™ smile. "What's wrong with my brain?"

"Nothing, as far as I can tell."

“Amazing news. Could you help me convince my ex-wife that I’m certifiably sane?”

“I’ll write you a note.”

“Nice.” He winks at me. He winks at me a lot, I’m noticing. “So, how are you liking Houston?”

“I haven’t really seen much yet. Besides the Space Center.”

“And a cemetery,” Levi interjects. I give him a dirty look and steal a cluster of his grapes in revenge. He lets me with a small smile.

“I could help you out,” Guy offers.

“Sure,” I say distractedly, busy glaring at Levi and making a show of chewing on his grapes.

“Really?”

“Uh-huh.”

Levi lifts one eyebrow and bites into his sandwich. It feels a lot like a challenge, so I steal a strawberry, too.

“Maybe we could go to dinner,” Guy says. “Are you free tomorrow night?”

Levi and I instantly turn toward him. I mentally rewind the conversation, trying to recall what I agreed to. A date? Exploring Houston? *Marriage?*

No. No, no, *no*. I have zero interest in dating, zero interest in Guy, and subzero interest in dating Guy. You know what I *do* have? Weird, intrusive thoughts. For instance, I’m currently remembering the way Levi’s hands felt around my waist as he slid me down his body. “Um, I . . .”

“Or this weekend?”

“Oh.” I give Levi a panicked glance. *Help. Please help*. “Thanks, um, but actually I . . .”

“Just name the night. I’m flexible and—”

“Guy,” Levi says, voice deep and low. “You might want to take a look at her left hand.”

I glance down, confused. My fingers are still clutching the strawberry. What does he— Oh. My grandmother’s wedding ring. I put it on this morning. Some good luck for the brain mapping sessions.

"Shit, I'm sorry," Guy immediately apologizes. "I had no idea that you __"

"Oh, it's fine. I'm not . . ." *Married*, I want to say, but it would be a waste of the amazing out Levi gave me. I cough. "I'm not bothered."

"Okay. My apologies, again." He leans toward Levi, asking with a conspiratorial tone, "Out of curiosity, how big's her husband? And how prone to violent rage?"

"Oh, no." I shake my head. "He doesn't really . . ." *exist.*

"Don't worry," Levi tells Guy. "Tim's mild mannered."

I face-palm internally. I can't believe Levi told Guy that I'm married to Tim. It's the worst, most easily disprovable lie ever. Couldn't he make up a random dude?

"Should I still get a groin protection cup?" Guy asks.

Levi shrugs. "Might be safest."

I look down at my chickpeas, wishing they were Levi's lunch. Fruit's so much better. *Believable lies* are so much better.

"You sure you're not mad, Bee?" Guy asks, a touch concerned. "I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable."

This is what I get for asking The Wardass for help. I give Levi the stink eye, snatch another strawberry, and sigh. "Nope. Not mad at all."

• • •

REIKE: What do you mean, Levi lied and said you're married to Tim???

BEE: He saw how flustered I was and tried to help me out.

REIKE: First: Guy Fieri has no business putting you in that position.

BEE: NOT his name!

BEE: But valid point.

REIKE: Second: this is a terrible lie, easily refutable if Guy Fieri talks with literally anyone else who knows you. It's going to bite you in the ass.

BEE: I am aware.

REIKE: Third: Levi does know you're not married to Tim, right?

BEE: Yeah. He and Tim are buds, they collaborate. Levi was the one who told Tim to find someone better back in grad school.

REIKE: Honestly, you should have just told Guy Fieri no. You screwed up.

BEE: I know but you're my sister and I'm human I NEED LOVE AND COMPASSION NOT JUDGMENT

REIKE: You need a full psychiatric evaluation.

REIKE: But 🖤🖤🖤

I sip on a blueberry smoothie and look around the busy coffee shop, waiting for Rocío to show up for our first GRE tutoring session.

It's probably going to be fine. My marital life (or lack thereof) is unlikely to come up with Guy. And I have other things to think about. Like the stimulation protocols I'm creating. Or income inequality. Or the fact that I haven't seen Félicette in a while, but I think she's been eating the little treats I left for her in my office. Important stuff.

"Did you know," Rocío greets me, sliding into the chair across from me, "that blood is the perfect substitute for eggs?" I blink. She takes it as an invitation to continue. "Sixty-five grams per egg. Exceedingly similar protein composition."

". . . Interesting." Not.

"You could have blood cake. Blood ice cream. Blood meringues. Blood pappardelle. Blood pound cake. Blood omelet or, if you prefer, scrambled blood. Blood tiramisu. Blood quiche—"

"I think I got the gist."

"Good." She smiles. "I wanted to let you know. Just in case blood is vegan."

I open my mouth to point out several things, but settle on, "Thank you, Ro. Very thoughtful of you. Why's your hair wet? Please don't say 'blood.' "

"I went to the gym. I like to channel Ophelia in the lazy river, pretend I'm drowning in a Danish brook after a flimsy willow branch collapsed under my weight."

"What was she doing on a willow?"

“She was *mad*. For *love*.” Rocío glares at me. “And they say a woman’s heart is fickle.”

Right. “Sounds like a nice pool.”

“It’s like a Sir John Everett Millais painting. Except that swim caps are mandatory and medieval dresses forbidden. Fascists.”

“Hmm. Maybe I should buy the membership after all.”

“You don’t need to, it’s free for NASA employees.”

“But not for contractors, right?”

“They didn’t make me pay.” She shrugs and pulls a GRE prep book out of her backpack. “Can we start with quantitative reasoning? Though parallelograms make me want to drown myself in a Danish brook. Again.”

Half an hour later, the reason my intelligent, math-savvy, articulate RA has been scoring so poorly on the GRE becomes unmistakably clear: this test is too dumb for her. In related news: we’re about to murder each other.

“The correct answer is B,” I repeat, seriously considering ripping a page off the book and stuffing it into her mouth. “You don’t need to solve for other options. X is a factor of y squared—”

“You’re assuming that X is an integer. What if it’s a rational number? A real number? Or, even worse, an irrational number?”

“I guarantee you that X is not an irrational number,” I hiss.

“How do you know?” she growls.

“Common sense!”

“Common sense is for people who are not smart enough to solve for pi.”

“Are you implying that—”

“Hey, girls!”

“*What?*” we bark in unison. Kaylee blinks at us from above a very pink drink.

“I didn’t mean to interrupt—”

“No, no.” I smile reassuringly. “Sorry, we got carried away. We’re having some . . . issues.” She’s wearing a purple jumpsuit and heart-shaped sunglasses, and her hair is pulled over her shoulder into a fishtail braid that reaches her rib cage. Her purse is shaped like a watermelon, and her necklace is a pink flower with the letter *K* in its middle.

I want to be her.

"Aw." She tilts her head. "Can I help?" There is something earnest about the way she asks, like she actually cares.

I ignore Rocío's kicks under the table and ask Kaylee, "Would you like to join us in fighting the hegemony of the Graduate Record Examination?"

I'm not sure what reaction I expected, but Kaylee huffing, eye-rolling, and pulling a chair up to our table was *not* it. "It's an indignity. GRE, SATs, all these tests are institutionalized gatekeepers, and the extent to which graduate programs over-rely on them for student admission is obscene. We are two decades into the twenty-first century, but we're still using a test based on a conceptualization of intelligence that's about as outdated as the Triassic. Graduate school success depends on qualities that are not measured by the GRE—we all know it. Why aren't we moving toward a holistic approach to graduate admission? Also, the GRE costs *hundreds* of dollars! Who has the financial solubility for that? Or for the prep courses, the materials, the tutors? Let me tell you who doesn't: *not-rich people*." She wags her finger at me, precise and wildly graceful. I am mesmerized. "You know who traditionally does poorly on standardized tests? Women and marginalized individuals. It's a self-fulfilling prophecy: groups that are constantly told by society that they're less smart walk into a testing situation anxious as hell and end up underperforming. It's called Stereotype Threat, and there's tons of literature on that. Just like there's tons of literature showing that the GRE does a terrible job at predicting who'll finish grad school. But the heads of graduate admission all over the country don't care and persist in using an instrument made to elevate rich white men." She shakes out her hair. "Burn it down, I say."

"Burn . . . what down?"

"*All of it*," Kaylee says fiercely with her high-pitched voice. Then she sucks a delicate sip from her straw. I *really* want to be her.

I glance at Rocío and do a double take. She's staring at Kaylee, breathing quickly, lips parted and cheeks flushed. Her right hand clutches the prep book like it's the edge of a ravine. "You okay, Ro?" I ask her. She nods without breaking her stare.

“Anyway,” Kaylee continues with a shrug, “why are we talking about the GRE?”

“Rocío is taking it, and I was helping her out. With”—I clear my throat —“mixed results. I believe we were about to shank each other over irrational numbers?”

“Sounds about right,” Rocío mumbles.

“Oh”—Kaylee waves her hand airily—“you shouldn’t be talking about irrational numbers. The thing about the GRE is, the less you know the better off you are.” I give Rocío my best *told you so* look. She kicks me again. “If you take a prep class, they teach you little tricks useful to pass the test—more so than actually knowing math.”

“You’ve taken the GRE?” Rocío asks.

“Yep. This manager thing is a temporary gig—I’m starting my Ph.D. in education in the fall. At Johns Hopkins.”

Rocío frowns. “You’re . . . going to Johns Hopkins?”

“Yes!” Kaylee nods happily. “My parents paid for a prep course, and I have tons of notes. Plus I remember most of it. Why don’t I help you?”

Rocío turns to me with an aghast look that almost makes me laugh. *Almost*. Instead, I grab my smoothie and stand. “It’s so lovely of you to offer.” Rocío tries to kick me again, but I slither away. “I’m going to check out the gym at the Space Center. Rocío said that it might be free.”

“It is. Levi had me change your status the other day.”

“Whose status?”

“Yours. And Rocío’s.” She winks. “I switched you to team members in the system, so you can get some of the perks.”

“Oh, thank you. That was very—” *Unexpected? Out of character? Something you must have made up on the spot because why would he do that?* “—generous.”

“Levi’s awesome. Best boss I ever had. He harassed NASA into giving me health insurance!” She smiles and turns to Rocío, who looks ready to drown herself in a Danish brook. Again. “Where did you want to start?”

Rocío incinerates me with her eyes as I wave goodbye. Honestly, she’s in excellent hands. Doesn’t even deserve it. On the sidewalk, I take out my

phone and quickly type up a tweet.

> @WhatWouldMarieDo . . . if one of the major obstacles preventing access to higher education were the GRE, a test that is 1) expensive 2) poorly predictive of overall graduate school success, and 3) biased against individuals who are lower-income, BIPOC, and non-cis-males?

I slip my phone into my pocket, and my thoughts go back to the gym. Levi probably just wants me to be able to use it so he doesn't have to retrieve me from a different cemetery every week. Can't blame him, honestly.

Yeah. That must be it.

11

NUCLEUS ACCUMBENS: GAMBLING

"LEVI? COULD YOU send me the newest—"

"Blueprints are on the server," he mumbles around the miniature screwdriver he's holding between his teeth. He doesn't look up from the mound of wires and plates he's working on.

It's past nine on a Friday. Everyone else has left. We're alone in the engineering lab, like most nights this week, in what I've come to think of as our Hostile Companionable Silence™. It's very similar to other types of silence, except that I know that Levi doesn't like me, and Levi knows that I know he doesn't like me and that I don't like him in return. But he doesn't bring it up, and I don't really think about it. Because we have no reason to.

So, yeah. Our Hostile Companionable Silence™ is basically a regular companionable silence. We sit facing each other at different workbenches. We dim the lights to see the shapes of the outside trees. We focus on our respective tasks. Every once in a while, we exchange comments, thoughts, doubts regarding BLINK. We could do the same from our respective offices, but looking up from my laptop and verbally asking a question beats writing it out in an email. Typing out, *Hey, Levi* and *Best, Bee* is such a pain.

Plus, Levi packs snacks. He brings them to work for himself, but he's lousy at gauging portions and always makes too much. So far I've had homemade trail mix, guac and saltines, rice cakes, popcorn, pita chips and bean dip, and about four kinds of energy balls.

Yes, he's a better cook than I'll ever be.

No, I'm not too proud to accept his food. I'm not too proud to accept *anyone's* food.

Plus, I've been in Houston for a month, and we're already close to a working version of the prototype. I deserve some celebratory face-stuffing.

"The *old* blueprint is on the server, not the new one."

He takes the screwdriver out of his mouth. "It is. I put it there."

"That's not the correct file."

He looks up. "Could you check again, please?"

I roll my eyes and sigh heavily, but I comply. Because today he made dark chocolate and peanut butter energy balls, and they were life-shatteringly good. "Done. Still not here."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"It has to be there." He gives me an impatient look, like I'm pulling him away from the crucial task of securing the country's nuclear codes.

"It's not. Do you want to bet something on it?"

"What would you like to bet?"

"Let's see." His face when he finds that I'm right is going to be better than sex. Better than sex with Tim, for sure. "A million dollars."

"I don't have a million dollars. Do you?"

"Of course I do, I'm a junior scientist." He chuckles. Something flutters inside me, and I ignore it. "Let's bet Schrödinger."

"I'm not betting my cat."

"Because you know you're going to lose."

"No, because my cat is seventeen and needs regular manual expression of his anal glands. But if you still want him . . ."

I make a face. "No, I'm good." I drum my fingers on my biceps, wondering what else Levi has that I want. I could make him cook for me

every day for a month, but he's sort of already doing that without realizing. Why change something that works? "If I win, you get a tattoo."

"Of what?"

"A goat. Alive," I add magnanimously.

"Can't."

"Why?"

"Already have one."

I laugh. "Oh, I've got it! Your mug? The one that says *Yoda Best Engineer*?"

"Yeah?"

"I want one. But it needs to say 'neuroscientist,' of course."

He lifts one eyebrow. "This is the equivalent to someone buying their own *World's Best Boss* mug. Congratulations, you're officially NASA's Michael Scott."

"And proud of it. Okay," I say, turning my computer around for him to see. "Deal. Come marvel at the lack of blueprints on the server."

"Wait. What about me?"

"What about you?"

"What will *you* do if *I* win?"

"Oh." I shrug. "Whatever you want. I'm right anyway. Would you like my hard-earned million dollars?"

"Nope." He shakes his head, pensive.

"Should I come over and express poor Schrödinger's anal glands for the duration of my stay in Houston?"

"Tempting, but Schrödinger's intensely private about his anus." He taps his masculine, chiseled chin. Huh? Why am I even noticing? "If I win, you're going to sign up for a 5K here in Houston."

I shrug. "Sure. I'll sign up for a—"

"And you're going to run it."

I burst into laughter. "There is no way."

"Why?"

"Because I'm currently on step four of my program, and still unable to run more than half a mile without collapsing. Running a 5K sounds about as

pleasant as bloodletting. By leeches."

"I'll run with you."

"You mean, you'll walk next to me with your seventy-mile-long legs?"

"I'll train you."

"Oh, Levi. Levi. You sweet summer child." I point at myself. Tonight I'm wearing a nose stud, galaxy leggings, and a white tank top. My purple hair is loose on my shoulders. I'm pretty sure one of my back tattoos is visible. Everything about me screams *Levi's kryptonite.* "You see this scrawny, stunted, unmuscled body? It's built to live in parasitic symbiosis with a couch. It resists training with the force of many million ohms."

Levi does stare at my body for a considerable amount of time, but then he looks away, flushed. Poor guy. Must be a tough sight for him. "It doesn't matter, does it? Since you're sure that you'll win?"

"True." I shrug. "Deal. Come taste the bitterness of defeat."

He does come, stalking to my bench in a few strides with those ridiculous seventy-mile-long legs. However, he doesn't stop in front of the laptop I conveniently turned for him. Instead he circles around the bench, comes to stand behind me, and then slides the computer in our direction. For me to better witness his impending massacre, I assume. "I can't wait to sip your tears out of my new mug," I murmur.

"We'll see." He leans his left hand against the bench and grabs the mouse with the other. Even on my high stool, he's still many inches taller than me, effectively caging me at my seat. It should feel uneasy, suffocating, but he leaves me enough room that I don't mind. Plus, I know it doesn't mean anything. Because he's Levi. And I'm Bee. It's actually almost pleasant, the heat he radiates in the blasting AC. He could have a successful second career as a weighted blanket.

"This is weird." I hear the frown in his voice. "The file's missing."

"Can the mug be twenty ounces?"

"It should be here." He leans forward, and his chin brushes the crown of my hair. It's not terrible. Sort of the opposite. "I saved it."

"Maybe you dreamt it? Sometimes in the mornings I think that I got up and brushed my teeth even though I'm still in bed. Though with my new

mug I'll be extra motivated to wake up early and have my coffee."

"Weird." Pity he's not paying attention to my gloating. I'm doing a pretty good bit, if I say so myself. "Look." He types quickly, the inside of his elbows brushing against my upper arms, pulling up a log interface. "See? Someone—me—saved the file at 1:16 p.m. Then at 4:23 someone else removed it . . ."

I know immediately where he's going with this. I tilt my neck back to look up at him, and he's already staring down from two inches above. God, *his eyes*. He invented a new color green. "It wasn't me!" I blurt out.

"How much do you want my cat?"

"Considerably less now that I know about his colorectal issues."

"And my mug?"

"A lot, but I swear it wasn't me!"

He hums skeptically. I can feel his breath against my face. Mint, with a hint of peanut butter. "I'm inclined to believe you, but only because this is not the first time."

"What do you mean?"

"The frequencies list for the parietal electrodes you sent me yesterday? The one you emailed *and* put on the server? It wasn't there."

I scowl. "But I put it there."

"I know. The engineers complained about missing and misplaced files, too, corrupted stuff. Lots of little things."

"Probably a server error."

"Or people screwing up."

"Can you tell who moved the file?"

He types a few more strokes. "Not from the logs. The system isn't coded that way. You know what it *can* do?" I shake my head, bumping against some spot on his chest. "It can tell me where the file was moved, and if it's still on the server but in a different folder. Which in the case of the blueprints is"—he presses the space bar and pulls up an image—"right here."

"Oh, perfect. That's exactly what I was—" My teeth click as I shut my mouth. "Wait a minute."

“What 5K should we sign up for?” He’s roaming the inside of his cheek with his tongue. “There’s usually a space-themed one in June—”

“No way.” I twist around. “The file was *not* where it was supposed to be.”

“The terms of the bet were that the file should be on the server.” He gives me a satisfied smile. “Bet you’re glad I didn’t agree to the anal expression.”

“You know I meant *in a specific folder*.”

“How unfortunate that you didn’t specify, then.” He puts a hand on my shoulder in mock reassurance—I seriously consider biting it off—and it’s ridiculous, how much every part of him dwarfs every part of me. Also ridiculous? The way those stupid intrusive thoughts of his body pressed against mine can’t seem to let up. And that having him so close reminds me of his thigh pushing up between my legs, solid and insistent against the seam of my—

“What are you two doing?”

Boris is standing in the entrance of the lab, and my first instinct is to push away from Levi and scream that *nothing happened, nothing happened, we were just working*. But the distance between us is perfectly appropriate. It just *feels* like it isn’t, because Levi is so large. And warm. Because he’s Levi.

“We were just about to sign up for a 5K,” he says. “How are you, Boris?”

“A 5K, huh?” He stays under the doorframe, studying us with his customary tired expression. “Actually, I come bearing news.”

“Bad news?”

“Not good.”

“Bad, then.”

Boris comes closer, holding a printout. “You guys planning to go to Human Brain Imaging?”

HBI is one of many academic conferences in neuroscience. It’s not particularly prestigious, but over the years it has cultivated a “party” reputation: it takes place in fun cities, with lots of satellite events and

industry sponsorships. It's where young, hip neuroscientists network and get drunk together.

But I'm not hip. And Levi is not a neuroscientist. "No," I tell Boris. "Where is it this year?"

"New Orleans. This coming weekend."

"Fun. You planning on going?"

He shakes his head and holds out the printout. "No. But someone is."

"MagTech?" Levi says, reading from above my shoulder.

"We've been keeping tabs on them. The company will present a version of their helmets at HBI."

"Have they filed for a patent?"

"Not yet."

"Then going public seems like . . ."

"A less-than-intelligent move? I think they're trying to get visibility to pull in new investors. Which is a great opportunity for us to find out where they're at."

"You're suggesting we send someone to New Orleans, have them attend HBI, and report back on what MagTech's progress is compared to ours?"

"No." Boris smiles for the first time since stepping inside the room. "I'm *ordering* the two of you to do that."

• • •

"I JUST DON'T think that driving to New Orleans to play Inspector Gadget is the best use of our time," I tell Levi as he walks me home like he insisted on (*"Houston is dangerous at night," "You never know who's lurking around," "Either you let me walk you home, or I follow ten feet behind you. Your choice"*). He's pushing his bike, which he apparently rides to work most days. Hmph. Overachiever. His helmet, strapped to his belt, bounces against his thigh every few steps. The soothing rhythm provides a solid backdrop to my bitching.

"We're at least Inspector Columbo."

“Gadget outranks Columbo,” I point out. “Don’t get me wrong, I see the value of keeping tabs on the competition, but wouldn’t it be better to send someone else?”

“No one else is as familiar with BLINK as we are, and you’re the only person who knows the neuroscience.”

“Fred *did* take that class in undergrad.”

Levi smiles. “At least it’s over the weekend. We won’t miss workdays.”

I lift one eyebrow. We’ve both worked every single weekend. “Why are you taking this so well?”

He shrugs. “I pick my battles with Boris carefully.”

“Isn’t this worth fighting for? We’re talking about two days in close quarters with the person you most despise in history.”

“Elon Musk is coming, too?”

“No—*me*.”

He sighs heavily, rubbing his forehead. “We’ve been over this, Bee. Besides, the team keeps screwing up basic stuff like file backup,” he adds wryly. “I wouldn’t trust them with . . . espionage.” He smiles when he says the last word, and my heart jumps. I’m inexplicably getting Cute Guy™ vibes from him—maybe because when he’s amused he looks damn cute.

“I still think it’s not human error,” I say, trying not to think about things like cuteness.

“Either way, I’ll call a meeting with the engineers and scare them into being more careful.”

“Wait.” I stop under my building. “You can’t do that if you’re not sure that it’s someone on the team.”

“*I’m* sure.”

“But you have no proof.” He looks at me with a puzzled expression. “You don’t want to accuse them of something they might not have even done, do you?”

“They did.”

I huff, frustrated. “What if it’s a weird fluke?”

“It’s not.”

“But you—” I press my lips together. “Listen, we’re co-leaders. We should make disciplinary decisions together, which means that you can’t accuse anyone of anything until I’m on board, too. And that’s not going to happen until I see actual proof that someone on the team is doing this.” He’s looking down at me with a soft, amused expression, as if he finds my irritation particularly endearing. *What a sadist*. “Okay?” I prompt him.

He nods. “Okay.” He unlocks his helmet and ties it under his chin. I most definitely do *not* notice the flex of his biceps. “And, Bee?”

“Yeah?”

He mounts the bike and starts riding away. “I’ll let you know which 5K I settle on.”

He’s giving me his back, but I flip him off anyway.

12

VENTRAL STRIATUM: YEARNING

SHMAC: That GRE tweet is becoming a bit of a thing, huh?

It sure is.

If by "bit" he means "a lot." And if by "thing" he means "shitstorm."

I have no idea how it even happened. The day I sent the tweet I went to bed after reading comments of people talking about their negative experiences with the test. When I woke up, there was a hashtag (#FairGraduateAdmissions), and dozens of associations of women and minorities in STEM had announced a GRE strike, encouraging students to turn in their grad school applications without the GRE.

@OliviaWeiBio If everyone does it, grad programs will have no choice but to evaluate us based on our experiences, CV, previous efforts, and skills. Basically, what they should already be doing.

Have I mentioned how much I love women in STEM? Because I *loooove* women in STEM.

Two hours later, a journalist from *The Atlantic* messaged me, asking for an interview. Then CNN. Then *Chronicle of Higher Ed*. Then Fox News (as if!). I paired up with Shmac to reach an even wider audience, and together we issued a thousand-word essay summarizing the lack of scientific evidence supporting the use of the GRE as an admission tool. I encouraged news outlets to interview the women who started the hashtag (except for Fox News, which I left on read). Several people came forward and talked to the media about the number of minimum-wage hours necessary to afford the test, about their frustration when wealthier classmates with access to private tutoring performed better, about the crushing disappointment of being rejected by dream institutions despite perfect GPAs and research experience because their scores didn't meet some arbitrary cutoff by a few percentage points. They're still doing the rounds, with more people opening up.

#FairGraduateAdmissions is a movement, and it has a real chance at getting rid of this stupid, unfair test. I've been all aflutter.

You know who else has been aflutter? Rocío. Who barged into the office declaring: "I won't be preparing for the GRE anymore, in solidarity with my brethren. Johns Hopkins will have to acknowledge how badass I am from my other application materials."

I looked up from my laptop and nodded. "I support that."

"You know why this is happening, right?" She leaned conspiratorially over my desk. "The other day we talked about how shitty the GRE is, and now people are rallying against it because Marie started the conversation. It can't be a coincidence."

"Oh," I stammered, "well, it probably *is* just a coincidence—"

"There are no coincidences," she said, beautiful dark eyes staring into mine. "Bee, we both know who I owe this to."

"Oh—I'm sure—"

"La Llorona." She took her phone out of her pocket and showed me pictures of beautiful creeks. Her eyes shone. "I've been visiting nearby

places where she was sighted, leaving little tokens of appreciation."

"Tokens?"

"Yes. Tarots, poems I wrote extolling the beauty of the macabre, pentagrams made of twigs. The usual."

"The . . . usual."

"I think it's her way of saying, 'Rocío, I recognize a kindred spirit, perhaps even a successor in you.' " She smiled at me, setting her bag on her desk. "I am so happy, Bee."

I smiled back and went back to work, relieved that Rocío doesn't suspect who's behind WWMD. Sometimes I wonder if Dr. Curie, too, had a secret identity she couldn't reveal. Period-wise, she could have been Jack the Ripper. Never say never, right?

MARIE: Do you think we're actually going to get rid of the GRE?

SHMAC: We're closer than ever, for sure.

MARIE: Agreed. Thank you for helping out, by the way.

Shmac and I have the same number of followers but completely different reaches. I hate thanking dudes for Sausage Referencing™, but truth is, there are plenty of male academics who'd rather guzzle curdled milk than engage with WWMD. Which is fine, because I'd love nothing more than pouring gallons of curdled milk down their throats. Still, #FairGraduateAdmissions can use all the support it can get.

MARIE: How's The Girl?

SHMAC: How's Camel Dick?

MARIE: Astonishingly, we're almost getting along. If we haven't come to blows yet, are we even collaborating?

Also, nice deflection. Tell me about The Girl.

SHMAC: Everything's fine.

MARIE: Fine has variable definitions. Narrow it down.

SHMAC: How narrow?

MARIE: Very.

SHMAC: Okay. Narrowingly: things are great, in the worst possible way. We've been working together a lot because that's what the project demands. Which might be why I'm on my fourth beer on a Thursday night.

MARIE: Why is working together bad?

SHMAC: It's just . . . I know things about her.

MARIE: Things?

SHMAC: I know what she loves to eat, what shows she watches, what makes her laugh, her opinions on pets. I know her dislikes (aside from me). I've been cataloging a million little quirks of hers in my head, and they are enchanting. She is enchanting. Smart, funny, an incredible scientist. And . . . there are things. Things I think about. But I'm drunk, and this is inappropriate.

MARIE: I love inappropriate.

SHMAC: Do you?

MARIE: Sometimes. Hit me.

SHMAC: I need you to know that I'd never do anything to make her uncomfortable.

MARIE: Shmac, I know that. And if you ever did, I'd cut your dick off with a rusty scalpel.

SHMAC: Fair.

MARIE: Tell me.

The clock in the kitchen ticks on. Late-night cars make soft noises past the window, and the screen of my phone goes black. I don't think Shmac will continue. I don't think he'll open up, and it makes me sad. Even though I don't know anything about his life, I get the impression that if he doesn't do it with me, he won't with anyone else. My eyes drift closed, accustomed to the dark, and that's when my screen lights up again.

The air rushes out of my lungs.

SHMAC: I know what she smells like. This little freckle on her neck when she pulls up her hair. Her upper lip is a little plumper than the lower. The curve of her wrist, when she holds a pen. It's wrong, really wrong, but I know the shape of her. I go to sleep thinking about it, and then I wake up, go to work, and she is there, and it's impossible. I tell her stuff I know she'll agree to, just to hear her hum back at me. It's like hot water down my fucking spine. She's married. She's brilliant. She trusts me, and all I think about is taking her to my office, stripping her, doing unspeakable things to her. And I want to tell her. I want to tell her that she's luminous, she's so bright in my mind, sometimes I can't focus. Sometimes I forget why I came into the room. I'm distracted. I want to push her against a wall, and I want her to push back. I want to go back in time and punch her stupid husband on the day I met him and then travel back to the future and punch him again. I want to buy her flowers, food, books.

I want to hold her hand, and I want to lock her in my bedroom. She's everything I ever wanted and I want to inject her into my veins and also to never see her again. There's nothing like her and these feelings, they are fucking intolerable. They were half-asleep while she was gone, but now she's here and my body thinks it's a fucking teenager and I don't know what to do. I don't know what to do. There is nothing I can do, so I'll just . . . not.

I can't breathe. I can't move. I can't even swallow the knot in my throat. I might actually cry. For him. For this girl, who'll never know that someone holds these mountains of want inside. And maybe for me, because I've made the choice to never feel this, never again. Never ever, and I realize now, now for the first time, what a terrible price I will pay. What a loss it will be.

MARIE: Oh, Shmac.

What else is there to say? He's in love with someone who doesn't love him back. Who is married. This story has no happy ending. And I think he knows, because he only replies with,

SHMAC: Yeah.

• • •

"HEY, BEE."

I set aside my article and smile at Lamar. "What's up?"

"Not much. Just wanted to tell you that I've updated the log system on the server."

"Oh?"

“Yeah. Nothing is changing on your end, but now users removing, replacing, or modifying files are automatically tracked. If something’s iffy, we’ll know who’s responsible.”

“Great.” I frown. “Why did you do that?”

“Because of the issues.”

“The issues?”

“Yeah. Missing files and all that. Levi called an engineering meeting to tear us a new one and asked me to change the server code.” He shrugs sheepishly. “Sorry about the mess.” He slips out of my office, leaving me to stare at my article. I am still staring three minutes later when someone else knocks on the doorframe.

“What’s with your return air vent?” Levi’s in the entrance, filling it like Lamar couldn’t quite manage. “It’s missing the grille. I’ll call maintenance —”

“No!” I swivel around. “It’s how Félicette gets inside at night. To eat the treats I leave for her!”

He lifts one eyebrow. “You want an uncovered vent because your imaginary cat—”

“She’s not imaginary. I found a paw print next to my computer the other day. I texted it to you.” And he replied, Looks like a splotch of Lean Cuisine. I hate him.

“Right. About tomorrow, we should head out early since New Orleans is over five hours away. I don’t mind picking up the rental and driving. You can sleep in the car, but I’d like to leave around six—”

“You called the meeting.”

He cocks his head. A wisp of black hair falls on his brow. “Excuse me?”

“You told the engineers about the missing files.”

“Ah.” He presses his lips together. “I did.”

I stand without knowing why. Put my hands on my hips, still not knowing why. “I asked you not to.”

“Bee. It needed to be done.”

“We agreed that we wouldn’t until we had proof.”

He folds his arms on his chest, a stubborn line to his shoulders. "We didn't agree. You told me you didn't want to call a full meeting about it, and I didn't. But I'm head of the engineering division, and I decided to tell *my* team about the issue."

I snort. "Your team is everyone but me and Rocío. Nice loophole."

"Why does it bother you so much?"

"Because."

"You're going to have to be a little more articulate than that."

"*Because* you did it behind my back." I bristle. "Just like a month ago, when you didn't tell me about NASA trying to get BLINK canceled."

"It's not the same at all."

"It is in theory. And it's a matter of principle." I bite the inside of my cheek. "If we're co-leaders, we need to agree before taking disciplinary measures."

"No disciplinary measure was taken. It was a five-minute meeting in which I asked my team to stop messing around with important files. I run a tight ship, and my team knows it—no one made a big deal about this except for you."

"Then why didn't you tell me you were going to do it?"

His eyes harden, hot and dark and frustrated. He scans my face, silent, and I feel the tension rise in the room. This is about to escalate. To a full-blown fight. He'll yell at me to mind my business. I'll throw my Lean Cuisine at him. We'll pummel each other, people will rush to separate us, we will cause a spectacle.

But he just says, "I'll pick you up at six." His tone is steely. Inflexible. Cold. So different from the one he's used with me for the past five weeks.

I wonder why that is. I wonder if he hates me. I wonder if *I* hate him. I wonder so much that I forget to answer him, but it doesn't matter. Because he's already gone.

13

SUPERIOR COLLICULI: WILL YOU LOOK AT THAT?

ONE HOUR, TWENTY-FOUR minutes, and seventeen seconds.

Eighteen.

Nineteen.

Twenty.

That's how long I've been in this Nissan Altima that smells faintly like lemon and faux leather and Levi's delicious, masculine scent. And that's how long we've been silent. Thoroughly, *wholeheartedly* silent.

It's going to be a craptastic weekend. We're going to play 007 while barely talking to each other. I see no flaw in this plan.

Is this my fault? Perhaps. Perhaps I initiated this—remarkably immature, I must admit—standoff, when I didn't say "Hi" back to him this morning. Perhaps I'm the culprit. But I don't give a flying squirrel because I'm mad. So I'm leaning in to it. I'm hoarding all of my grievances against Levi and bulking them up into a big, withering, incandescent supernova of silent treatment that . . .

Honestly, I'm not sure he's noticed.

He *did* lift his eyebrow after I refused to say "Hi," in my best impression of an eleven-year-old just done rereading *The Baby-Sitters Club*. But he shrugged it off pretty quickly. He put on a CD (*Mer de Noms* by A Perfect

Circle, and God, his amazing musical taste is like a knife to my ovaries) and started driving. Impassible. Relaxed.

I bet he's not even thinking about it. I bet he doesn't care. I bet I'm here, playing nervously with my grandmother's ring, sulking to the rhythm of "Judith," while he's probably pondering the laws of thermodynamics or whether to join the No-Poo movement. What do dudes even think about all the time? The Dow Jones. MILF porn. Their next date.

Does Levi date? I'm sure he does, given the number of people who seem to think of him as a Sexy Guy™. He might not be married, but maybe he's in a long-term relationship. Maybe he's deeply in love, like Shmac. Poor Shmac. My chest hurts in a messy, confusing way when I think about what he said. About Levi feeling similarly intense, scary, powerful things for a woman. About Levi *doing* the things Shmac talked about doing to her.

I shiver, wondering why stray memories of Levi pressing me against a wall are *still* popping up in my head. Wondering whether the girlfriend he might not even have would be extraordinarily lucky or the very opposite. Wondering *why* I'm even wondering—

"I'm sorry."

I turn so fast I pull a muscle. "What?"

"I'm sorry."

"For what?" I massage my neck.

He stares at the road and lifts one eyebrow. "Is this some educational technique? 'Apologizing for dummies'?"

"No. I'm honestly befuddled."

"Then, I'm sorry for calling the meeting without asking for your approval."

I squint. ". . . Really?"

"Really, what?"

"Are you . . . actually apologizing?"

"Yep."

"Oh." I nod. "To be precise, then, you *did* ask for my approval. And I explicitly did *not* give it."

“Correct.” I think he’s biting the inside of his cheek to avoid smiling. “I didn’t heed your *explicit* advice. I wasn’t trying to undermine your authority, or to act like your opinion is irrelevant. I think . . .” He presses his lips together. “Actually, I *know* I’m overly invested in BLINK. Which makes me overly controlling and bossy. You’re right, it was the second time I didn’t discuss important issues with you.” He finally looks at me. “I’m sorry, Bee.”

I blink. Several times. “Wow.”

“Wow?”

“That was an excellent apology.” I shake my head, disappointed. “How am I supposed to keep up my very adult silent treatment for the next three and a half hours?”

“You were planning to stop once we got to New Orleans?”

“I wasn’t, but realistically: well-executed cold shoulders require an enormous amount of upkeep, and I’m first and foremost lazy.”

He laughs softly. “Should we switch albums, then?”

“Why?”

“I thought late-nineties grunge might fit your mood, but if you’re outgrowing your wrath, maybe we can listen to something a little less . . .”

“Angry?”

“Yeah.”

“What are our options?”

There’s something exquisitely weird about Levi Ward telling me his phone’s passcode (338338) and letting me poke around his music folder. His collection doesn’t include a single embarrassing Nickelback song (I hate him). It’s a mix of nineties bands—my decade of choice—except that they’re all . . .

I opt for shuffle, settle back into my seat to gaze at the beautiful landscape, and give him the only criticism I can think of. “You do know women make music, too, right?”

“What does that mean?”

“Nothing.” I shrug. “Just that the entirety of your music library is angry white boys.”

He frowns. “Not true.”

“Right. That’s why you have exactly . . .” I scroll down for a few seconds. More seconds. A minute. “. . . a grand total of zero female-performed songs on your phone.”

“That’s not possible.”

“And yet.”

His scowl deepens. “It’s just a coincidence.”

“Mmm.”

“Okay—I’m not proud of it, but it’s possible that my musical taste was influenced by the fact that in my formative years I, too, was an angry white boy.”

I snort. “I bet you were. Well, if you ever want to work through that rage productively I could recommend some singer-songwriters—” There’s something on the side of the road. I crane my neck to see better. “Oh my *God*.”

He gives me a worried look. “What’s going on?”

“Nothing. I just—” I wipe my eyes. “Nothing.”

“Bee? Are you . . . crying?”

“No,” I lie. Poorly.

“Is it about female singer-songwriters?” he says, panicky. “I’ll buy an album. Just let me know which one is best. Honestly, I don’t know enough about them to—”

“No. No, I— There was a dead possum. On the side of the road.”

“Oh.”

“I . . . have issues. With roadkill.”

“Issues?”

“It’s just . . . animals are so cute. Except for spiders. But spiders are not *really* animals.”

“They . . . are.”

“And who knows where the possum was going? Maybe she had a family? Maybe she was bringing home food to kids who now wonder where Mommy is?” I’m making myself cry harder. I wipe my cheek and sniffle.

“I’m not sure wildlife abides by the rules of traditional nuclear family structure—” Levi notices my glare and instantly shuts up. He scratches his nape and adds, “It’s sad.”

“It’s okay. I’m fine. I’m emotionally stable.”

His lips curl up. “Are you?”

“This is nothing. Tim used to make me play this stupid ‘Guess the Roadkill’ game to toughen me up, and once I *literally* ran out of tears.” Levi’s jaw hardens visibly. “And when I was twelve we saw a family of splattered hedgehogs on a Belgian highway and I cried so hard that when we stopped to get gas, a *Federale Politie* agent questioned my uncle on suspicion of child maltreatment.”

“Got it. No stops until New Orleans.”

“No, I promise I’m done crying. I’m an adult with a shriveled, hardened heart now.”

He gives me a skeptical glance, but then says, “Belgium, huh?” and his voice is curious.

“Yeah. But don’t get too excited, it was the Flemish part.”

“I thought you said you were from France.”

“I’m from all over the place.” I take off my sandals and push my legs against the dashboard, hoping Levi won’t take offense at my bright yellow nail polish and my incredibly ugly pinkies. I call them the Quasimotoes. “We were born in Germany. My father was German and Polish, and my mother half-Italian, half-American. They were very . . . nomadic? My dad was a technical writer, so he could work anywhere. They’d settle in one place, stay for a few months, then move to a new one. And our extended family was very scattered. So when they died, we—”

“They died?” Levi turns to me, wide-eyed.

“Yeah. Freak car accident. Airbags didn’t work. They’d been recalled, but . . .” I shrug. “We’d just turned four.”

“We?” He’s more invested in my life story than I expected. I thought he just wanted to fill the silence.

“Me and my twin sister. We don’t really have memories of our parents. Anyway, after their death we were sent from relative to relative. There was

Italy, Germany, Germany again, Switzerland, the US, Poland, Spain, France, Belgium, the UK, Germany again, a brief stint in Japan, the US again. And so on."

"And you'd learn the language?"

"More or less. We were enrolled in local schools—which, *total* pain, having to make new friends every few months. There were times I thought in so many languages I didn't even speak, I couldn't understand the inside of my own head. Not to mention, we'd always be the kids with an accent, the kids who didn't really get the culture, so we never properly fit in, and—Shouldn't you be monitoring the road instead of staring at me?"

He blinks repeatedly, as if shaking off the shock, and then looks straight ahead. "Sorry," he mumbles.

"Anyway. There were lots of countries, lots of relatives. Eventually we landed in the US with my maternal aunt for the last two years of high school." I shrug. "I've been here ever since."

"And your sister?"

"Reike's like my parents used to be. All wanderlustful. She left as soon as she legally could, and for the past decade she's been going from place to place, doing odd jobs, living day by day. She likes to . . . just be, you know?" I laugh. "I'm positive that if my parents were alive they'd gang up with Reike against me for not loving to travel like they do. But I don't. Reike's all about seeing new places and making new memories, but to me, if you constantly go after new things, there's never *enough* of anything." I run a hand through my hair, playing with the purple tips. "I don't know. Maybe I'm just lazy."

"It's not that," Levi says. I glance up. "You want stability. Permanency." He nods, as if he just found the missing piece of a puzzle and the resulting picture suddenly makes sense. "To be somewhere long enough to build a sense of belonging."

"Hey, Freud," I say mildly, "you done with the unsolicited therapy?"

He flushes. "That will be three hundred dollars."

"Seems like the going rate."

"Are you and your sister identical?"

“Yes. Though she insists that she’s prettier. That dumbass.” I roll my eyes fondly.

“Do you see her often?”

I shake my head. “I haven’t seen her in person in almost two years.” And even then, it was two days, a layover in New York on her way to Alaska from . . . I have no clue. I’ve long lost track. “But we talk on the phone a lot.” I grin. “For example, I bitch to her about you.”

“Flattering.” He smiles. “Must be nice to be close with your sibling.”

“You’re not? Did you drive a rift between you and your brothers with your bad habit of doing stuff without clearing it with them first?”

He shakes his head, still smiling. “There is no rift. Just . . . what’s the opposite of a rift?”

“A closing?”

“Yeah. That.”

Whatever the state of his relationship with his brothers is, he doesn’t seem happy about it, and I feel a pang of guilt. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to imply that your family hates you because you’re a control freak.”

He smiles. “You’re just as much a control freak as I am, Bee. And I think it has more to do with the fact that I’m the only member of my extended family who’s not in some military career.”

“Really?”

“Yup.”

I bend my legs and angle myself to face him. “Is it an unspoken rule in your family? You must be in the armed forces, or you shall be a failure?”

“It’s absolutely spoken. I’m the official disappointment. Only cousin who’s a civilian—out of seven. The peer pressure is intense.”

“Whoa.”

“Last year, at Thanksgiving, my uncle publicly asked me to change my name to stop bringing shame to the family. This was *before* he guzzled a case of Blue Moon.”

I scowl. “You are a NASA engineer with *Nature* publications.”

“You kept track of my pubs?”

I eye-roll. “I don’t. Sam just likes to blabber about how amazing you are.”

“Maybe I should bring her to Thanksgiving next year.”

“Hey.” I poke his bicep with my index finger. It’s hard and warm through the sleeve of his shirt. “I know we’re . . . nemesi?”

“Nemeses.”

“—nemeses, but your family doesn’t. And I usually spend Thanksgiving trying to see how many vegan marshmallows I can stuff into my mouth. So if next year you need someone to explain exactly how amazing you are at your job—or even just to bitch-slap them—I’m available.” I smile, and after a few seconds he smiles back, a little soft.

There is something relaxing about this. About *here*. About the moment we’re having. Maybe it’s that Levi and I know exactly where we stand when it comes to each other. Or that for both of us, the most important thing in the world right now is BLINK. Maybe there is a connection between us. A very odd, very complicated one.

I lean back in my seat. “That,” I muse, “is the one pro of being an orphan.”

“What is?”

“Having no parents to disappoint.”

He mulls it over. “Can’t argue with that logic.”

After that we go back to our Hostile Companionable Silence™. And after a little longer I fall asleep, Thom Yorke’s voice low and soothing in my ears.

• • •

I HAVE BEEN at HBI for three and a half minutes when I meet the first person I know, a former RA in Sam’s lab who’s now a Ph.D. student at—I glance at his badge—Stony Brook. We hug, catch up a bit, promise to get together for drinks over the weekend (we won’t). By the time I turn around, Levi has met someone *he* knows (an elderly guy with a fanny pack and an

eyeglass chain that scream "engineer" from the top of the Grand Canyon). The cycle lasts about twenty minutes.

"Jesus," I mutter once we're alone. It's not as though we're famous, or anything like that, but the world of neuroimaging is very insular. Incestuous. Inescapable. And lots of other *I* adjectives.

"I had more social interactions in the past twenty minutes than in the last ten months," he mumbles.

"I saw you smile at least four times." I pat his arm comfortingly. "That can't have been easy."

"I might have to lie down."

"I'll get an ice pack for your cheeks." I look around the crowded hall, suddenly reminded of why I hate academic conferences. "Why did we come today, anyway? MagTech's presentation's not until tomorrow."

"Boris's order. A feeble attempt to look like we're not *just* here to snoop, I believe."

I grin. "Do you ever feel like we're super-spies and he's our handler?"

He gives me a half-amused, half-withering look. "No."

"Come on. Boris's totally the M to my James Bond."

"If you're James Bond, who am I?"

"You're the Bond girl. I'm going to seduce you in exchange for blueprints and stab you while I sip on my martini." I wink at Levi, then realize that he's flushing. Did I go too far? "I didn't mean to—"

"There are a couple of engineering talks I want to go to," he says abruptly, pointing at the conference program and sounding remarkably normal. I must have imagined it. "You?"

"There's a panel at four that sounds interesting. Also, it's my sacred duty to go out for a drink. Big Easy and all that."

"Oh. Did you want to . . ."

I cock my head. "Want to?"

He clears his throat. "Did you want company? Were you already planning to go with your friend, or—"

"My friend?"

"That friend of yours."

“Who?”

“I forgot her name. That girl who was in Sam’s lab? Dark hair, did fNIRS research, and . . .” He squints. “Nah, that’s all I remember.”

“Are you talking about Annie Johansson?”

He glances back at the program. “Maybe? That sounds right.”

I can’t believe Levi forgot Annie’s name after she pursued him mercilessly for ages. She knew his damn blood type, for cake’s sake. Probably his social security number, too. “Why would I go for drinks with her?”

“I just assumed,” he says absentmindedly. “You two were inseparable.”

My heartbeat picks up. Probably for no reason. “But she’s not here.”

Levi’s still reading the program, not really paying attention to me. “I thought I saw her a minute ago.”

I whirl around. Yes, my palms are starting to sweat, but just because sometimes they do. All palms sweat sometimes, right? I look about frantically, but I’m sure that Annie’s not here. She can’t be. Levi didn’t even remember her name—he can’t be right about this. He probably thinks that all women with dark hair look the same and—

Annie.

With a shorter haircut. And a pretty lilac dress. And a big smile on her pretty lips. Standing in line at the badge reclamation station, chatting with someone, someone who just walked up and is handing her a cup of coffee, someone who—

Tim.

Tim. I see Tim, but only for a second. Then my vision blurs, large black dots swallowing the world. I’m hot. I’m cold. I’m sweaty. I’m shaking like a leaf and my heart is pounding and I’m flying away.

“Bee.” Levi’s voice grounds me for a second, warm and deep and worried and solid and thank God he’s here, or I’d be scattered all over, debris in the wind. “Bee, are you okay?”

I’m not. I’m dying. I’m fainting. I’m having a panic attack. My heart and my head are exploding.

“Bee?”

Levi is holding me now. Holding me again and I'm in his arms and it feels like I'm safe, how is it possible that when he's around, only when he's around, I really feel sa—

14

PERIAQUEDUCTAL GRAY & THE HIPPOCAMPUS: PAINFUL MEMORIES

THIS IS NOT my hotel room.

First of all, it has a *way* better view. A busy, picturesque New Orleans street, instead of that cluttered courtyard with stacked patio furniture. Second, it smells faintly like pine and soap. Third, and perhaps most important: it's not messy, and if I have one talent in the world, it's turning a hotel room into complete non-vandalic chaos within the first three minutes of my stay.

Your girl has some serious splinter skills.

I sit up in the bed, which I assume is also not mine. The first thing I see is green. A particular brand of green: Levi Green™.

"Yo," I tell him, a little stupidly, and immediately slump back on the pillow. I feel drained. Exhausted. Nauseous. Out of it. How did I get here, anyway?

Levi comes to sit next to me, on the side of the bed. "How are you?" The rich rumble of his voice is a hint of sorts. The last time I heard it was very recently. And I couldn't breathe. I couldn't breathe because . . . ?

"Did I lose consciousness?"

He nods. “Not immediately. You walked with me to the elevator. Then I carried you here.”

It comes back to me at once. Tim. Annie. Tim *and* Annie. They’re here at the conference. Talking. To each other. I must be in Levi’s bed and the inside of my head is rotten and I’m losing it again and—

“Deep breaths,” he orders. “In and out. Don’t think about it, okay? Just breathe. Steady.” His voice is just in-charge enough. The perfect amount of commanding. When I’m like this, a hairbreadth from exploding, I need structure. External frontal lobes. I need someone to think for me until I’ve calmed down. I don’t know what’s more upsetting: that Levi is doing this for me, or that I’m not even surprised about it.

“Thank you,” I say when I’m more in control. I turn to my side, and my right cheek brushes against the pillow. “This was . . . Thank you.”

He scans my face, unconvinced. “Are you feeling better?”

“A little. Thank you for not freaking out.”

He shakes his head, holding my eyes, and I take more deep breaths. Seems like a good idea. “Want to talk about it?”

“Not really.”

He nods and does what he did weeks ago, after saving me from the almost-pancaking: he puts his warm hand on my brow and pushes my hair back. It might be the best thing I’ve felt in months. Years. “Is there anything I can do?”

“No.”

He nods again and makes to stand. The dread in the pit of my stomach is back with a vengeance. “Can you—” I realize that I slid my finger through one of the belt loops in his jeans and immediately flush and let go. Still, all the embarrassment in the world isn’t enough to keep me from continuing. “Can you stay? Please? I know you’d probably rather be—”

“Nowhere else,” he says, without skipping a beat. “There’s nowhere else I’d rather be.” We stay like that, in the Hostile Companionable Silence™ that’s as much a part of our relationship as BLINK, and peanut-butter energy balls, and arguing about Félicette’s existence. After a minute, or maybe thirty, he asks, “What happened, Bee?” and if he sounded pushy, or

accusing, or embarrassed, it would be so easy to shut him down. But there's only pure, naked concern in his eyes, and I don't just *want* to tell him. I *need* to.

"Annie and I had a falling out in our last year of grad school. We haven't talked since."

He closes his eyes. "I'm a fucking asshole."

"No." I close my fingers around his wrist. "Levi, you—"

"I fucking pointed her out to you—"

"You couldn't have known." I sniffle. "I mean, you *are* an asshole, but for other reasons." I smile. I must look ridiculous, my cheeks glistening with sweat and tears and smudged mascara. He doesn't seem to mind, at least judging from the way he cups my face, his thumb warm on my skin. It's a lot of touching for two nemeses, but I'll allow it. I might even welcome it.

"Annie's at Vanderbilt," he says with the tone of someone who's talking to himself. "With Schreiber."

"You do remember her, then."

"Seeing you like this definitely jostled my memory. Other things, too." He doesn't move his hand, which is totally fine by me. "Is that why you're not working with Schreiber? Why you're with that idiot, Trevor Slate?"

"Trevor is *not* an idiot," I correct him. "He's a sexist, imbecile dickhead. But, yeah. We were supposed to do our postdocs together. We even timed our graduations so we'd move to Nashville at the same time. And then . . ." I shrug as best as I can. "Then that mess happened, and I couldn't go anymore. I couldn't be with her and Tim."

He frowns. "Tim?"

"All three of us were supposed to work with Schreiber."

"But what does Tim have to do with this?"

This is the hard bit. The part I've only said out loud twice. Once to Reike, and later to my therapist. I tell myself to breathe. Deeply. In and out. "It was over Tim, the falling out Annie and I had."

Levi tenses. His hand moves lower, to cup the back of my neck. Somehow it's exactly what I need. "Bee."

“I think you know how Tim was. Because everyone knew how Tim was.” I smile. The tears are flowing again, quietly unstoppable. “Well, except for me. I just . . . I met him in my freshman year of college, you know? And he liked me. And that winter I had nowhere to go, and he asked if I wanted to spend it with his family. Which, of course, I did. It was amazing. God, I miss his family. His mother would knit me socks—isn’t it the loveliest thing, knitting something warm for someone? I still wear them when it’s cold.” I wipe my cheeks with my wrists. “My therapist said that I didn’t *want* to see. To admit how Tim truly was, because I overinvested in our relationship. Because if I acknowledged that he was a jerk, then I’d have to give up on the rest of his family, too. Maybe she’s right, but I think I just wanted to trust him, you know? We were together for years. He asked me to marry him. He invited me into his life when no one else ever had. You trust a person like that, don’t you?”

“Bee.” Levi’s looking at me in a way that I cannot comprehend. Because no one has ever looked at me like that.

“So, there were all these other girls. Women. I never blamed them—it wasn’t their job to look after my relationship. I only ever blamed Tim.” My lips taste like salt and too much water. “We’d been engaged for three years when I found out. I confronted him and took off my engagement ring and told him that we were done, that he’d betrayed me, that I hoped he got gonorrhea and his dick fell off—I don’t even know what I told him. I was so mad I wasn’t even crying. But he said that it didn’t mean anything. That he didn’t think I’d be so upset about it, and that he’d stop. That if I’d been . . .” I can’t even bring myself to repeat it, the way he twisted everything to make it my fault. *If you fucked me a little more frequently*, he’d said. *If you were better. If you knew how to enjoy it and make it enjoyable. You could at least put in some effort.* “We’d been together for seven years. No one else had been in my life that long before, so I took him back. And I tried harder. I put more effort in . . . in our relationship. In making him happy. I’m not a victim—I made an informed choice. Figured that if getting married, if *stability* was what I wanted, then I shouldn’t give up on Tim too quickly. You reap what you sow.” I let out a shuddering sigh.

“And then he and Annie—” My voice breaks, but Levi can imagine the rest. He knows enough already, probably more than he ever cared to. He doesn’t need it spelled out, that I was such a needy, pitiful doormat that not only did I take back my cheater of a fiancé, but I also never realized that he *kept* cheating on me. With my closest friend. In the lab where I was working every day. I don’t think about Annie too often, because the pain of losing *her*, I never quite learned how to manage. “I don’t know why she did it. But I couldn’t go with them to Vanderbilt. It was career suicide, but I just couldn’t.”

“You . . .” Levi’s hand tightens on my nape. “You *didn’t* marry him. You never married him.”

I smile, rueful. “The worst thing is, I *tried* to forgive him for a long time. But then I couldn’t, and . . .” I shake my head.

Levi is blinking, a dumbfounded expression on his face. “You’re *not* married,” he repeats, and I sit up as his shock finally penetrates my brain.

“You—you thought I was?” He nods, and I let out a wet laugh. “I was sure you knew, since you and Tim collaborate. And I let Guy believe it, because I thought you were trying to give me an out, but”—I lift my left hand—“this is my grandmother’s ring. I’m not married. Tim and I haven’t spoken in years.”

Levi mouths something I cannot make out and pulls his hand back, as though all of a sudden my skin is scorching him. He stands and walks to the window, staring outside as he runs a hand through his hair. Is he angry?

“Levi?”

No reply. He rubs his mouth with his fingers, as if deep in thought, as if coming to terms with some seismic event.

“Levi, I know you and Tim collaborate. If this puts you in a weird position, you can—”

“We don’t.” He finally turns around. Whatever just happened, he seems to have collected himself. The green of his eyes, though, is brighter than before. Brighter than ever. “Collaborate, that is.”

I sit up, legs dangling over the mattress. “You and Tim don’t collaborate anymore?”

"Nope."

"Since when?"

"Now."

"What? But—"

"I don't feel like going to the conference," he interrupts. "Do you need to rest?"

"Rest?"

"Because of the"—he gestures vaguely at me and the bed— "fainting."

"Oh, I'm fine. If I needed rest every time I fainted, I'd need . . . a *lot* of rest."

"In that case, there's something I'd like to do."

"What is it?"

He doesn't answer. "Want to join me?"

I have no idea what he's referring to, but it's not as though I have a busy schedule. "Sure?"

He smiles, a little smug, and a terrible thought occurs to me: I'm going to regret whatever's about to happen.

• • •

"I *HATE* THIS."

"I know."

"What gave it away?" I push a sweaty purple strand from my forehead. My hands are shaking. My legs are twigs, but made of slime. There's a distinctive taste of iron in my throat. A sign that I'm dying? Possibly. I want to stop but I can't, because the treadmill is still going. If I collapse, the walking belt is going to swallow me in a vortex of clammy darkness. "Is it the wheezing? The near-puking?"

"Mostly the way you've said it eight times since starting to run—which, by the way, was exactly sixty seconds ago." He leans forward from his own treadmill and hits the speed button, slowing it. "You did great. Now walk a bit." He straightens and keeps on running at a pace I wouldn't achieve even hunted by a swarm of maggots. "In three minutes, you're going to run sixty

more seconds." He's not even short of breath. Does he have bionic lungs? "Then you'll walk three more minutes, and then you'll cool down."

"Wait." I tuck my hair behind my ear. I need to invest in a headband. "That's it?"

"Yup."

"I only run for two minutes? That's my training?"

"Yep."

"How do you know? Have you ever done a Couch-to-5K? Have you ever even *been* on a couch?" I give him a skeptical once-over. He looks upsettingly good in his mid-thigh shorts and Pitt T-shirt. A patch of sweat is spreading on his back, making the cotton stick to his skin. I can't believe there are people who manage to look hot while running. Screw them.

"I did some research."

I laugh. "You did research?"

"Of course." He gives me an affronted look. "I said I'd train you for the 5K, and I will."

"Or you could just release me from our bet."

"Nice try."

I shake my head, laughing some more. "I can't believe you did research. It's either incredibly nice, or the most sadistic thing I've ever heard." I contemplate it. "I'm leaning toward the latter."

"Hush, or I'll sign you up for the Meat Lovers 5K."

I shut up and keep on walking.

Three hours later, we end up in a bar in the French Quarter.

Together.

As in, me and Levi Ward. Getting drinks. Sipping Sazerac at the same table. Giggling because the waitress served mine with a heart-shaped straw.

I'm not sure how it happened. I think some googling was involved, and intense skimming of a website called Drinking NOLA, and then a five-minute walk in which I determined that one of Levi's steps equals exactly two of mine. But I'm blanking on how we came to the decision that venturing out together would be a good idea.

Oh well. Might as well focus on the Sazerac.

“So,” I ask after a long sip, whiskey burning sweetly down my throat, “who’s engaging with Schrödinger’s anus this weekend?”

Levi smiles, swirling the amber liquid in his tumbler. After his shower he didn’t dry his hair, and some damp wisps are still sticking to his ears. “Guy.”

“Poor Guy.” I lean forward. The corners of the world are starting to get fuzzy in a soft, pleasant way. Mmm, alcohol. “Is it difficult? Who taught you? Does it require tools? Does Schrödinger like it? What does it smell like?”

“No, the vet, just gloves and some treats, if he does he hides it well, and *awful*.”

I take another sip, fully entertained. “How did you end up with a cat who needs . . . expression, anyway?”

“He didn’t when I first got him, seventeen years ago. He spent fifteen years long-conning me into loving him, and now here I am.” He shrugs. “Expressing once a week.”

I burst into more laughter than is probably warranted. Mmm, alcohol. “You got him as a kitten? From the shelter?”

“From under the garden shed. He was chomping on a sad-looking pigeon wing. I figured he needed me.”

“How old were you?”

“Fifteen.”

“You guys have been together most of your lives.”

He nods. “My parents aren’t exactly pet people, so it was either bringing him wherever I went or leaving him to fend for himself. He came to college with me. And grad school. He’d jump on my desk and stare at me all accusing and squinty-eyed when I slacked off. That little asshole.”

“He’s the real secret of your academic success!”

“I wouldn’t go *that* far—”

“The source of your intelligence!”

“Seems excessive—”

“The only reason you have a job!” He lifts one eyebrow and I laugh some more. I’m hilarious. Mmm, alcohol. “It’s so nice of Guy to do this for

you."

"To be clear, Guy's just feeding Schrödinger. I did the expressing before leaving. But yeah, he's great."

"I have an inappropriate question for you. Did you steal Guy's job?"

He nods pensively. "Yes and no. He'd probably be BLINK's lead if I hadn't transferred. But I have more team-leading and neuro experience."

"He's awfully graceful about it."

"Yup."

"If it were me, I'd stab you with my nail filer."

He smiles. "I don't doubt it."

"I guess deep down Guy knows he's cooler." I take in Levi's confused expression. "I mean, he's an *astronaut*."

". . . And?"

"Well, here's the deal: if NASA were a high school, and its different divisions were cliques, the astronauts would be the football players."

"Is football *still* a thing in high school? Despite the brain damage?"

"Yes! Crazy, right? Anyway, the engineers would be more like the nerds."

"So I'm a nerd?"

I sit back and study him carefully. He's built like a linebacker.

"I actually played tight end," he points out.

Shit. Did I say it out loud? "Yes. You're a nerd."

"Fair. What about the neuroscientists?"

"Hmm. Neuroscientists are the artsy kids. Or maybe the exchange students. Intrinsically cool, but forever misunderstood. My point is: Guy's been to space, therefore he's part of a better clique."

"I see your reasoning, but counterpoint: Guy has never been to space, never will."

I frown. "He said he worked with you on his first space mission."

"As ground crew. He was supposed to go to the ISS, but he failed the psychological screening last minute—not that it means anything. Those tests are ridiculously selective. Anyway, most of the astronauts I've met are very down to earth—"

"*Down to Earth!*" I laugh so hard, people turn to stare. Levi shakes his head fondly.

"And to become an astronaut, you're required to have a STEM degree. Which means that they're nerds, too—nerds who decided to take on additional training."

"Wait a minute." I lean forward again. "You want to eventually be an astronaut, too?"

He presses his lips together, pensive. "I could tell you a story."

"Oooh. A story!"

"But you'd have to keep it secret."

"Because it's embarrassing?"

"A little."

I pout. "Then I can't do that. You're my archenemy—I *have* to slander you. It's in the contract."

"No story, then."

"Oh, come on!" I roll my eyes. "Fine, I won't tell anyone. But FYI, it will probably kill me."

He nods. "I'm willing to risk it. You know how my family isn't happy with me?"

"Still looking forward to kicking their collective ass at Thanksgiving."

"Appreciated. Once I started working for NASA, my mother took me aside and told me that I might be able to redeem myself in my father's eyes if I applied for the Astronaut Corps."

My eyes widen. "Did you do it?"

"Yep."

"And?" I'm leaning closer and closer. This is *engrossing*. "Did you get in?"

"Nope. Didn't even make it through the elimination round."

"No! Why?"

"Too tall. They recently tightened the height restriction—can't be taller than six two, or shorter than five one."

I briefly contemplate the notion that neither Levi nor I fall within astronaut height requirements, but for dramatically different reasons. Wild.

“Were you heartbroken?”

“My family was, yeah.” He looks me straight in the eye. “I was so relieved, my friend and I got passed-out drunk that night.”

“What?”

He tips back his head and downs the rest of his drink. I’m *not* staring at his Adam’s apple, I’m *not*. “Outer space is fucking *terrifying*. I’m thankful for the ozone layer and the gravitational pull of the moon and whatnot, but they’d have to tie me like a spit-roasted pig to send me out there. The universe keeps expanding and getting colder, chunks of our galaxy are sucked away, black holes hurl through space at millions of miles per hour, and solar superstorms flare up at the drop of a hat. Meanwhile NASA astronauts are out there in their frankly inadequate suits, drinking liters of their own recycled urine, getting alligator skin on the top of their feet, and shitting rubber balls that float around at eye level. Their cerebrospinal fluid expands and presses on their eyeballs to the point that their eyesight deteriorates, their gut bacteria are a shitshow—no pun intended—and gamma rays that could *literally* pulverize them in less than a second wander around. But you know what’s even worse? The smell. Space smells like a toilet full of rotten eggs, and there’s no escape. You’re just stuck there until Houston allows you to come back home. So believe me when I say: I’m grateful every damn day for those two extra inches.”

I stare at him. And stare at him. And stare a little more, open-mouthed. I stare at this man who is six four and two hundred pounds of muscle and just vented to me for five minutes about the fact that space is a scary place.

God. Oh, *God*. I think I like him.

“There’s one single format in which space is tolerable,” he says.

“Which is?”

“Star Wars movies.”

Oh, *God.*

I jump out of my seat, grab his hand, and pull him out of the bar. He follows without resisting. “Bee? Where are we—?”

I don’t bother looking back. “To my hotel room. To watch *The Empire Strikes Back.*”

• • •

"YODA'S A BIT of a dick." I lean over to steal a handful of popcorn from Levi's lap. My own bag, sadly, is long gone. Should have paced myself.

"All Jedi are dicks." Levi shrugs. "It's the forced celibacy."

I can't believe I'm on a bed. With Levi Ward. Watching a movie. With Levi Ward. And it doesn't even feel weird. I steal more popcorn, and inadvertently grab his thumb. "Sorry!"

"That's not vegan," he says, a hint of something in his voice, and I am mesmerized by the shadows the TV light casts on his face. His elegant nose, the unexpected fullness of his lips, his black hair, blue-tinted in the dark.

"What?" he asks, without taking his eyes off the screen.

"What, what?"

"You're staring."

"Oh." I should avert my gaze, but I'm a bit drunk. And I like looking at him. "Nothing. Just . . ."

He finally turns. "Just?"

"Just . . . look at us." I smile. "It doesn't even feel like we hate each other."

"That's because we don't."

"Aw." I tilt my head. "You stopped hating me?"

"New rule." He turns more fully toward me, and his ridiculously long legs brush against mine. In the swampy forests of Dagobah, Yoda's torturing poor Luke under the guise of training him. "Every time you say that I hate you, you have to come over and express Schrödinger's glands."

"You say it like it wouldn't be enjoyable."

"Since you clearly have a fetish: every time you mention this nonexistent enmity I supposedly feel, I'll add a mile to the race you owe me."

"That's *crazy*."

"You know what to do to make it stop." He pops a kernel into his mouth.

"Hmm. Can I say that *I* hate *you*?"

He looks away. "I don't know. Do you hate me?"

Do I hate him? No. Yes. No. I haven't forgotten how much of a dipshit he was in grad school, or that he reprimanded me about *my clothes* on my first day of work, or any of the dickish things he's done to me. But after a big day like today, when he saved me from total, catastrophic implosion, it all seems so distant.

No, then. I don't hate him. In fact, I kind of like him. But I don't want to admit it, so while Han and Leia bicker about how much they love each other on the screen, I punt.

"What are you wearing tomorrow?"

He gives me a puzzled look. "I don't know. Is it relevant?"

"Of course! We're spying."

He nods in a way that clearly showcases how full of shit he thinks I am. "Something inconspicuous, then. A trench coat. Sunglasses. You brought your fake mustache, right?"

I smack his arm. "Not all of us have a long history of espionage—by the way, what's the story behind the MagTech pics?"

"That's a secret."

"Did you really risk your career, like Boris said?"

"No comment."

I roll my eyes. "Well, if you did . . . thank you." I settle back into my pillow, focusing on the movie.

"Hey, Bee?"

I love Wookiees so much. Best aliens ever. "Yeah?"

"If tomorrow you see Annie and Tim and feel . . . like you felt today. Just take my hand, okay?"

I should ask what that would even accomplish. I should point out that his hand is not a powerful brand of instant-release benzodiazepines. But I think he might be right. I think it might just do the trick. So I nod, and steal the entire bag of popcorn from his lap.

He does have a point. Space *is* kind of scary.

15

FUSIFORM AREA: FAMILIAR FACES

"THEY HIRED A neuroscientist," Levi says, gaze locked on the podium where engineers with heavy Dutch accents are discussing their stimulation headgear.

I'd nod, but I feel queasy. MagTech's helmets are at the same stage as ours. Maybe a bit further. A *tiny* bit further, but still. The banana I had for breakfast is lurching in my stomach. "Yup."

"They solved the output location problems in a different way," he murmurs. He's talking to himself, one hand clenched on the armrest, white-knuckled.

Yep. This sucks.

Hey, Dr. Curie. I know you're busy frolicking naked with Pierre, and I know that it's unfair of me to ask, but if you or Hertha could do me a solid and zap MagTech's stimulation headgear with radioactive lightning, that'd be lovely. If they patent the technology before we do, they'll just sell it to whatever militia pays the most, and as you know, humans don't need cognitive enhancement when it comes to killing each other. Kthxbye.

"They're stuck on merging hardware and software," Levi says.

"Yep. Just like us." I squirm in my chair. This trip was pointless. Absolutely pointless. I want to go back to Houston and put in five, ten,

twenty hours of work. Go through every single piece of data we've collected and see if I missed anything that will help us move forward.

This is a race. It always was, from the very start, but after the uncertainty of my first week on BLINK, I was so grateful for the opportunity to have a shot at it, it almost slipped my mind. Doing our best, making progress—that seemed enough. Spoiler: it wasn't. For the first time in weeks I think, *really* think, about my job at NIH. I've been sending weekly reports to Trevor and the Institute director. There hasn't been much of a reaction on their end except for "Nice job" and "Keep up the good work." I wonder whether they read or just skim for buzzwords. *Neural networks. Magnetic pulses. Neuroplasticity*'s always a hit, too.

What would they say if I told them that MagTech might reach the finish line first? Would they blame *me*? Would my job be safe? And what would happen to the promotion I want? I'll either be fired or work for Trevor in perpetuity—is this what my career ambitions have come to, an eternal quest for the lesser evil?

Become a scientist, they said. *It will be fun*, they said.

"Let's go." Levi springs up from his chair the second the presentation ends. "If we leave now, we can be home by mid-afternoon."

I've never been more eager to get out of an air-conditioned room. "You want to hole up in the lab and work until you pass out?"

"Yup." He pops the *P*.

At least we're on the same page. "You know what?" I muse, weaving my way through the crowd. "I might have an idea on how to tackle the gradient fields issue—"

"*As I live and breathe*. Levi and Bee!"

We stop dead. But we don't turn around, because we don't need to. Voices are like faces, after all: one never forgets them, not if they belong to people who are important. Your parents. Siblings. Best friends, partners, crushes.

Ph.D. advisors.

"I cannot believe you're *here* and I didn't *know it*."

Levi's eyes lock with mine. *Fuck*, I read in the way his pupils dilate. I telepathically answer, *Indeed.* His expression darkens.

I love Sam. We both love Sam. I've never talked about her with Levi, but I know they had a special relationship, just like she and I did. She was an outstanding advisor: intelligent, supportive, and she cared, really *cared*, about us. After my falling out with Tim and Annie, I didn't have the heart to tell her what really happened. So I made up some lies about a friendly breakup and about needing to be in Baltimore with nonexistent relatives. Sam was the one who helped me find my job with Trevor, and she never criticized me for turning down a better position at Vanderbilt. I always love hearing from her, catching up on her work, getting coffee together. Always.

Except for right now.

I smile as she engulfs me in a bear hug, and—okay, this feels amazing. She's tall and sturdily built. A truly committed hugger. I find myself laughing, squeezing her back. "It's so nice to see you, Sam."

"That's my line. And you, Levi, look at you. Are you even taller?" Their hug is significantly more subdued. I'm nonetheless shocked that Levi does hugs, and by the affectionate smile on his lips.

"Not that I know. It's nice to see you, Sam."

"Why didn't I know you two were here?"

"Because we're not on the program. We just drove up for a specific presentation."

"We?" Sam's eyes widen. She looks between us a few times before settling on Levi with a huge pleased grin that I cannot interpret. Then she takes one of his hands. "I didn't know there was a 'we,' Levi. I'm so happy for you. I've been hoping for so long, and finally, such an incredible—"

"Bee and I are working together on a NASA project. *Temporarily*." He says it quickly, like a teenager stopping his mother from revealing that he still sleeps with a stuffed triceratops.

Sam gasps, covering her mouth. "Of course. Of course, the NASA project. I can't believe it slipped my mind. Still, you two should come to my brunch. In"—she glances at her phone—"ten minutes. All my grads are coming. Food's on me, of course."

Uh-oh.

Uh-*shitshitshitshit*-oh.

I glance up at Levi, ready to beg him not to make me watch Tim and Annie eat huevos rancheros for thirty minutes, but he's already shaking his head. "Thank you, but we can't. We need to get on the road."

"Oh, nonsense. It'll be less than an hour. Just make an appearance, say hi to everyone, have breakfast on me. You're both so skinny."

I wonder how one could possibly look at Levi's chest, or biceps, or legs, or . . . anything, really, and think the word "skinny," but he doesn't skip a beat. "We need to get going."

"You can't," she insists. Have I mentioned that Sam's bossy? I guess it's a professional hazard when you've been running a lab for decades. "You were my favorite grads. What's the point of having a lab brunch if you two aren't there? Might as well cancel!"

"You didn't even know we were here until three minutes ago," Levi points out patiently.

"But now I do. And . . ." She leans forward and puts a hand on both our shoulders. "I'll be making an important announcement today. I'm retiring at the end of the semester. And once I'm out, I'm not planning to do the conference circuit anymore. So there might not be a next time."

Levi nods. "I get it, Sam. But we really—"

"We'll come," I interrupt. "Just tell us where." I chuckle at the excited way Sam claps her hands.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" Levi asks me calmly once Sam is out of earshot.

"I'm sure I do *not* want to do this." If I had to type a comprehensive list of the things I'd rather do, I'd need several gigabytes of cloud space. "But if she's announcing her retirement and it's important for her, we can't *not* go, not after everything she's done for us." I massage my temple, thinking longingly of ibuprofen. "Plus, my old therapist would be proud of me."

He studies me for a long beat. Then he nods, once. I can tell he doesn't like this. "Fine. But if you're not feeling well, you tell me immediately and I'll take you away." He speaks in an authoritative way that should make me

want to tell him to shove it, but . . . it doesn't. The opposite, actually. What a mystery. "And remember my hand."

"Okay, Daddy." I realize the blunder only once the words are out of my mouth. Since I can't take it back, I turn around and walk out of the conference center, blushing. Oops.

What a cluster of a day. And it's only seven minutes past ten.

• • •

VISUALIZE THIS: YOU step into a restaurant, and the hostess guides you to your party's table. It's round and full, but when you and your companion arrive two chairs will be pulled up, guaranteeing lots of cozy elbowing. Yay. You're welcomed by many pairs of wide eyes, and gasps, and a few "My gosh, how long has it been?" Some are for you, some for your companion. Some for both. You realize that aside from the person who invited you, no one was expecting you. Double yay.

You want to focus on catching up, ask old friends about their lives, but there's something that nags at you. A tiny worm slithering in the back of your skull. It has to do, you initially think, with the two people who've yet to stand to greet you, and with the fact that you used to be engaged to one of them, and to love the other like a sister. Fair. That would nag at anyone, right?

But then there's an extra *something* cranking up the tension: almost everyone at the table knows *exactly* what happened between you, your former fiancé, and your not-so-sister. They know how poorly you left off, how you ended up having to find another job, how miserable it made you, and even though they're not mean people, there's a sense swarming around, a sense that a show is about to happen. A show that involves you.

You following this? Good. Because there's one more layer to this onion. It elevates this brunch above your run-of-the-mill trash-fire, and it has to do with your companion. He wasn't exactly a fan of yours the last time you two hung out with these people, and seeing you arrive with him is making

their heads *explode*. They cannot compute. The show was always gonna be good, but now? Now it's fucking *Hamilton*, baby.

Are you visualizing this? Are you feeling the deep unpleasantness of the situation smack inside your bones? Are you considering crawling under the table and rocking yourself to sleep? Okay. Good. Because it's *exactly* where I'm at when Timothy William Carson comes to stand in front of me and says, "Hi, Bee."

I want to kick him in the nuts. But I'm sad to report that there are lots of pairs of eyes on me, and while I haven't passed the Louisiana bar, I fear nut-kicking might be considered assault in this great state. So I smile my best fake smile, ignore the crawling feeling in the pit of my stomach, and reply, "Hey, Tim. You look great."

He doesn't. He looks okay. He looks fine. He looks like a Cute Guy™ who needs a Dorian Gray portrait, because his rotten personality is starting to show. He looks acceptable, but nothing compared to the guy standing next to me. Who, by the way, is saying, "Tim."

"Levi! What's up?"

"Not much."

"We gotta start working on those collabs again." Tim puckers his lips like the asshole he is. "I've been *swamped*."

Levi's smile stays on, and when Tim leans in for a bro hug, he accepts it.

Which has me scowling. What the hell? I thought Levi was on *my* side. Which sounds stupid when said out loud, and unfair of me to expect, because Levi and I are barely friends and my battles are not his and he has every right to man-hug whoever. . . .

My train of thought fades as I notice Levi is not just *hugging* Tim. He's also gripping his shoulders tightly, fingers digging painfully into Tim's flesh as he murmurs something in his ear. I can't make out the words, but by the time Levi straightens back up, Tim's mouth is pulled in a thin, straight line, his face is milk white in a way I don't remember ever seeing before, and his expression looks almost . . . scared.

Is Tim *scared*?

"I— You— I didn't mean to," he stammers, but Levi interrupts him.

“Nice to see you again,” he says in a commanding, dismissive tone. Tim must take it as what it is: an order to scurry away.

“What just happened?” I whisper while Levi pulls out my chair. Apparently, we’re in 1963.

“Look.” He points at Sam’s food. “They have quinoa bowls.”

“Why does Tim look *terrified*?”

He gives me an innocent look. “He does?”

“Levi. What did you say to him?”

Levi ignores me. “Sam, does that bowl have eggs in it?”

The first twenty minutes aren’t that bad. The problem with round tables is that you can’t fully ignore anyone’s existence, but Tim and Annie are distant enough that I can chat with others without it being too awkward. Aspects of this are genuinely nice—having Sam around, hearing that old acquaintances got married, had kids, found academic jobs, bought houses. Once in a while Levi’s elbow brushes against mine, reminding me that I’m not wholly alone. There’s someone in my corner. A guy who loves Star Wars, and is too tall for space, and will take care of a kitten for half his life.

Then there’s a lull in conversation, and someone asks from across the table, “How did you two end up working together, anyway?”

Everyone tunes in after that. All eyes are on Levi and me. Sadly, Levi is chewing on a potato wedge. So I say, “It’s an NIH-NASA collab, Mike.”

“Oh yeah, right.” Mike looks a bit buzzed, but he takes another sip of his punch. He was a third year when I joined the lab. Also: he was a shithead. “But, like, how are *you two* managing it? Levi, do you bleach your brain after every meeting, or . . . ?”

My cheeks burn. Some people chuckle, a couple laugh outright, and others look away, clearly embarrassed. Sam frowns, and from the corner of my eye I see Tim smirk. I wish I had a witty comeback, but I’m too mortified by the fact that Levi finding me disgusting is still the lab’s funniest inside joke. I open my mouth without knowing what to say, and—

“We’re doing great,” Levi tells Mike, his tone a mix of big-dick calm and *I could kill a man with a beach ball*. He leisurely puts his arm on the back of my chair, and plucks a grape from my plate. A deafening silence

falls at the table. Everyone is looking at us. *Everyone*. "What about you, Mike?" Levi asks without bothering to look up from my food. "I heard there were problems with your tenure packet. How's that coming along?"

"Oh, um . . ."

"Yeah. I thought so."

Holy shit. Holy shit. *Holy shit*. I guess Levi's done eating his potatoes?

"Out of curiosity," he whispers in my ear once the conversation has moved along and Mike is looking down at his own plate, chastised. "Did *everyone* think that I hated you, back in grad school? It wasn't just *your* delusion?"

"It was a widely known truth."

His arm tenses around my shoulders, as tight as his jaw.

A few minutes later I excuse myself to go to the restroom. I have eye makeup on, but I say "Screw it" and wash my face with cold water anyway. Who's going to be looking at my runny eyeliner anyway? Levi? Weepy Mess Bee is nothing he hasn't already seen.

Then I notice her. Annie, in the mirror. She's standing right behind me, waiting for me to finish using the sink. Except there are three more sinks, and zero other people in the bathroom. So maybe it's just me she's waiting for.

My head hurts. And so does my heart, around the edges Annie cracked in it two years ago. I can't talk to her. Can't. *Can't*. I take my time drying my face with my sleeves. Then I buck up, turn around, and face her.

She's stunningly beautiful. Always has been. There's something indescribable about her, something magic that made me happy to be in her presence. Oddly enough, the feeling is still there, a mix of familiarity and love and awe that knifes deep as I stare at her face. Seeing Tim again was painful, but it's nothing, *nothing* compared to having Annie right here.

For a moment I'm terrified. She can hurt me very, *very* deeply with just a few choice words. But then she says, "Bee," and I realize that she's crying. Judging by the burning in my eyes, so am I.

"Hey, Annie." I attempt a smile. "Long time no see."

“Yeah, I . . . yeah.” She nods. Her lips are trembling. “I love your hair. Purple might be my favorite.”

“Thank you.” A beat. “I tried orange last year. I looked like a traffic cone.” Silence stretches, wistful. It reminds me of when we’d fill every second together with chatter. “Well, I need to . . .” I move for the door, but she stops me with a hand on my forearm.

“No—*please*. Please, Bee, can we just . . .” She smiles. “I missed you.”

I missed her, too. I miss her all the time, but I won’t tell her. Because I hate her. Me and my multitudes.

“I’ve been listening to that album you gave me a lot. Even though I’m still not sure I like it. And last year I went to Disneyland and there was this new Star Wars park and I thought of you. And I haven’t been able to make friends in Schreiber’s lab because they’re all dudes. Total WurstFest™. Except for two girls, but they’re best friends already, and I don’t think they like me much, and . . .” She’s crying harder now, but also laughing in that self-deprecating way that is *so* Annie. “So, you and Levi, huh? He’s even hotter than back at Pitt.”

I shake my head. “It’s not like that.”

“You probably made all his dreams come true. He looks happier than I’ve ever seen him. Not that I’d seen him happy, like *ever*, before today.”

A cold shiver runs down my spine. I have no idea what she’s talking about. “Actually, Levi hated me,” I say stubbornly.

“I doubt it. Not by any definition of that term. He just really—” She shakes her head firmly. “This isn’t what I came to talk about, I don’t know why I’m going on about stuff that . . .” She takes a deep breath. “I’m sorry.”

I could pretend not to know what she’s apologizing for. I could pretend that I didn’t think about her every day for the last two years. I could pretend that I don’t miss the way we’d make each other laugh until our abs ached, but it would be exhausting, and even though it’s eleven fifteen in the morning, I am already so very tired.

“Why?” I ask. A question I rarely allow myself when it comes to Annie. “Why did you do it?”

“I don’t know.” Her eyes close. “I don’t know, Bee. I’ve been trying to figure it out for years. I just . . . don’t know.”

I nod, because I believe her. I never doubted Annie’s love for me.

“Maybe I was jealous?”

“Jealous?”

She shrugs. “You were beautiful. The best in the lab. With the glamorous globe-trotting past. You were always good at everything, always so . . . so happy and cool and fun. You made it seem effortless.”

I was never any of those things. Not by a long shot. But I think of Levi—impenetrable, cold, arrogant Levi, who turned out not to be impenetrable, cold, arrogant at all. Being so dramatically misunderstood doesn’t seem that unlikely.

“And you and Tim . . . You and I were always together, but in the end, you’d go home to Tim and I’d be alone, and there was this . . . *thing* that I was never part of.”

“Were you trying to . . . to punish me?”

“No! No, I was just trying to feel . . . more like you.” She rolls her eyes. “And because I’m a dumbass, I picked the worst part of you to do that. Fucking Tim.” She lets out a bubbly, moist laugh. “We never . . . It lasted a week between us. And I—I *never* liked him, you know it. I *despised* him. You were so much better than him, and everyone knew it. I knew it. He knew it, too. The moment I did it, *while* I was doing it—I thought of you the whole time. And not just because he was a lousy lay. I kept wondering if doing such an unspeakably bad thing would . . . elevate me, somehow. Make me more like you. God, I was messed up. I still am.” She wipes her tears with two fingers. There’s already more, flowing down. “I wanted to apologize. But you blocked my number, and I told myself I’d give you space and see you at Vanderbilt. Then the summer passed, and you weren’t there . . .” She shakes her head. “I’m so sorry. I’m *so* sorry, and I think about it every day, and—”

“I’m sorry, too.”

She gives me an incredulous look. “You have nothing to be sorry about.”

“I may not have fucked your fiancé, but I’m sorry I wasn’t there for you when you felt like you weren’t good enough. You were my best friend, but I always thought you were . . . invincible.”

We are quiet until she says, “This is in no way meant as self-congratulatory, but I’m glad you didn’t marry Tim. I’m glad you’re with Levi. He’s the kind of person you deserve.”

I don’t see the point in contradicting her. Not when I agree with everything she’s said, including things that aren’t quite true. So I nod and make to leave.

“Bee?” she calls.

I turn.

“Would you mind it if I texted you, once in a while?”

I should probably be thinking big thoughts about forgiveness, and punishment, and self-preservation. I should throw the question back at her and ask if *she*’d let me text her if our situations were reversed. I should reflect on this when my brain is not a mushy mess. But I forget all the “shoulds,” and tell her the first thing to cross my heart. “We could try.”

She nods, relieved.

Levi is outside the bathroom, a hulking mountain leaning against the wall. I don’t have to ask to know that he saw Annie come after me, and decided to follow in case I needed him. I don’t have to lie or reassure him that I’m fine even as I wipe my cheeks. I don’t have to explain anything.

I can just nod when he asks if I’m ready to go, and take his hand when he offers it.

16

SUBTHALAMIC NUCLEUS: INTERRUPTIONS

I WAKE UP from a four-hour stress-nap as Levi merges onto the interstate for the last stretch of the trip, and BLINK is instantly on my mind. "About the frequency trains, I wonder if we could take advantage of the magnetothermal—" Something splattered on the side of the road catches my eye. "What's *that*?"

"Wow." Levi's tone is forcefully cheerful. "Check out that farm on the right!"

"But what's that on the— Oh *no*."

"I didn't see anything."

"Is it a dead raccoon?"

"No."

"Yes, it was!" I start crying. Again. For the seventh time in forty-eight hours. You'd think my lacrimal ducts would have runneth over, but nope. "Poor baby."

"You know what? It *was* a raccoon, but it had clearly died of old age."

"What?"

"In that very spot. He died peacefully in his sleep, then someone ran him over. Nothing to be sad about." I glare at him. At least I'm not crying

anymore. “What were you saying about leveraging magnetothermal properties?”

“You’re full of shit.” I lift my legs, kick his forearm, and then lay my foot on the glove compartment. His eyes follow my every movement, linger briefly on my bare knees. “But thank you. For babysitting my feelings this weekend. For not letting me free-fall into a pit of despair. I promise I’m going to revert to adult status. Starting now.”

“Finally,” he deadpans.

I laugh. “For real—what did you tell Tim?”

“I said hi. Asked how he was.”

“Come on. You were speaking into his ear.”

“Just whispering sweet nothings.”

I snort. “Wouldn’t be surprising. You might be the only person in the lab he didn’t cheat on me with.” His long fingers grip the steering wheel and I instantly regret my words. “Hey, I was joking. I actually don’t care much anymore. Would I mind seeing Tim bent in two with a severe hemorrhoid attack? Nope. But neither would I go out of my way to stab him. Which I didn’t know before this weekend, and that’s . . . freeing.” Liberating, this almost-indifference. It makes me much happier than the resentment I harbored for years. And the conversation with Annie . . . I haven’t processed it yet, but maybe this weekend was less of a waste than I thought. Except that I’m low-key panicking about my job again. “Whatever you told Tim . . . thank you. It was nice to see him almost shit his pants.”

He shakes his head. “You shouldn’t thank me. It was selfish.”

“What did he do to you? Did he sneak bacon into your sandwich? Because that’s totally his signature move—”

“No.” He presses his lips together, staring at the road. “He lied to me.”

“Oh, yeah.” I nod knowingly. “His *other* signature move.”

The local NPR fills the silence. Something about Rachmaninoff. Until Levi says, “Bee, I . . . I’m not sure I should be telling you this. But hiding things from you hasn’t worked out in our favor. And you asked me to be honest.”

“I did.” I study him, unsure where he’s heading.

“When you and I first met,” he says slowly, carefully weighing his words, “I had issues talking to people. About certain things.”

“Like . . . aphasia?”

He smiles, shaking his head. “Not quite.”

I try to think back to fifth-year Levi—he seemed larger than life, indomitable, whip-smart. Then again, Annie seemed invincible, and I apparently seemed effortless. Grad school really screwed us up, didn’t it? “I never noticed it. You were capable, self-assured, and got along with most people.” I mull it over. “Except for me, of course.”

“I’m not explaining myself well. I had no issues talking to normal people. My issues were . . . with you.”

I scowl. “Are you saying that I’m not *normal*?”

He laughs silently. “You’re not normal. Not to me.”

“What does that mean?” I turn in the seat to face him, not sure why he’s insulting me again, after two days of being incredibly lovely. Is he having a relapse? “Just because you thought I was ugly or unlikable, it doesn’t mean that I wasn’t *normal*—”

“I never thought of you as ugly.” His hands tighten even more around the wheel. “Never.”

“Come on. The way you always acted was—”

“The opposite, in fact.”

I frown. “What do you even—” Oh.

Oh.

Oh.

Does he mean that—? No. Impossible. He wouldn’t. Would he? Even if we . . . He can’t possibly be implying *that*. Can he?

“I—” My mind goes blank for a split second—complete, utter white-out void. I’m suddenly frozen numb, so I lean forward to turn off the AC. I have no clue how to answer him. How to stop my heart from beating out of my throat. “Do you mean that you . . . ?”

He nods.

“You didn’t . . . you didn’t even let me finish the sentence.”

“Whatever you’re imagining, from the tamest to the most . . . inappropriate thoughts, that’s probably where my mind was at.” He swallows visibly. I watch his throat move. “You were always in my head. And I could never get you out.”

I turn to the window, scarlet. There’s no universe in which I’m parsing his words correctly. This is a misunderstanding. I’m having some neurological event. And all I want to ask is, *What about now? Am I still in your head?* “You always stared at me like I was some obscene monstrosity.”

“I tried not to stare, but . . . it wasn’t easy.”

“No. No, you—the dress. You hated me in that dress. My blue dress, the one with—”

“I know what dress, Bee.”

“You know because you *hated* it,” I say in a panic.

“I didn’t hate it.” His words are quiet. “It just took me by surprise.”

“My *Target dress* took you by surprise?”

“No, Bee. My . . . reaction to *you* wearing it did.”

I shake my head. This cannot be true. “You wouldn’t even *sit* next to me.”

“It was hard to think when you were close.” His voice is husky.

“No. No! You refused to collaborate with me. You told Tim he should marry someone better, you avoided me like the bubonic plague—”

“Tim warned me off.”

I turn to him. “What?”

“He asked me to back off and leave you alone.”

“He . . .” I cover my mouth and imagine Tim, *very* average-sized Tim, confronting Levi, a not-so-gentle bison. “How did he . . . ?”

“He told me you knew that I was . . . interested. That I was making you uncomfortable. That you found me unpleasant.” Levi’s throat works. “He asked me to avoid you as much as I could. And I did. In a way, it was easier.”

“Easier?”

He shrugs with a self-deprecating smile. “Just . . . wanting and not having, it can get unbearable. Quickly so.” He wets his lips. “I didn’t know

what to say anyway. You have to understand, people don't talk about the things they feel where I come from. I got really tongue-tied around you—leading you and everyone else to believe that I despised you, apparently. I . . . I had no idea. I owe you an apology for that."

I can't believe what he's saying. I can't believe what I'm hearing. I can't believe Tim knew and successfully manipulated Levi into staying away while he screwed his way through Pitt's student body.

"Why are you telling this to me? Why now?"

He looks at me, serious and earnest like only Levi Ward could ever be, and something surges into me. Something painful and delightful and confusing. Something breathtaking and spellbinding, rich and frightening. Not a fully formed feeling, but an early draft of it. It's on the back of my throat and on the tip of my tongue. I want to get a grasp of its taste before it's gone. I am reaching out, almost there when Levi says, "Bee, I—"

My phone rings. I groan in frustration and relief and scramble to pick up. "Hello?"

"Bee, this is Boris Covington." *Huh?* "Are you and Levi back?"

I glance at Google Maps. "We're about ten minutes out."

"Could you both come to the Discovery Building as soon as you get in?"

"Sure." I frown, switching to speakerphone. "Does this have to do with BLINK?"

"No. Well, yes. But only indirectly." Boris sounds tired and almost . . . embarrassed? Levi and I exchange a long glance.

"What's this about?"

Boris sighs. "It's about Ms. Jackson and Ms. Cortoreal. Please, come in as soon as you can."

Levi presses on the gas pedal.

• • •

I LOOK AROUND Boris's office and blink at least four times before asking, "What do you mean, 'sexual intercourse is forbidden in work areas'?"

Boris's skin's even redder than usual, and he retreats farther into his desk. "Exactly what I said. It's—"

"Bee's not my mother and I'm not a minor," Rocío proclaims from one of the guest chairs. "This conversation is a HIPAA violation."

Boris pinches the bridge of his nose. He's clearly been at this for a while. "HIPAA rules apply to medical records, not to you being caught having sex in your office. Which, just like *every other space in the building*, is video-surveilled twenty-four-seven because of the high-security projects it houses. Now, no need to worry about that, Guy is a security admin and has agreed to delete all footage. But Bee is your direct supervisor, just like Levi is Ms. Jackson's, and because of the disciplinary actions required when NASA employees engage in activities such as . . . intercourse in work spaces, they need to be informed."

I glance at Levi. His face is a blank void. I'm positive that inside he's rolling with laughter like a pork in mud. *Positive*.

"Sorry." I scratch the back of my neck. "Just to be clear, you two were having intercourse with . . ."

"With each other," Rocío tells me proudly.

I nod. Next to Rocío, Kaylee appears enraptured by her own pink nail polish. She hasn't looked up since we came in.

"Um . . ." I have no idea what to say. Zero. Nada. Maybe Dr. Curie left behind helpful tips to handle similar situations? If only her notes weren't too radioactive to be touched before the year 3500. Maybe I can go to the Bibliothèque Nationale with a hazmat suit and—

"I won't write up a complaint," Boris says, "and I trust Bee and Levi will take care of . . ." He gestures vaguely at two of the smartest women I've ever met, who must be going through a spell of nymphomania. "But I beg you on my knees. Don't do anything similar *ever again*."

"Thank you, Boris," I say, hoping I sound as grateful as I feel.

The walk to the outside of the building is deadly silent—until we form a circle and stare at one another with varying levels of hostility (Rocío), mortification (Kaylee), and poorly hidden amusement (Levi). I hope I look neutral. I probably don't.

"So . . . that happened," I start.

Rocío nods. "Sure did."

"How did Boris even . . . find you?"

"Guy came into our office looking for something, found us on your desk, ratted us out."

"On *my*—why did you have to do it on *my*—" I stop. Take a deep breath. "To be clear." I look between them. "This was . . . consensual?"

"Very," they answer in unison, locking eyes and smiling like idiots.

I clear my throat. "Is there anything you'd like to add?" I ask Levi, meaning *please help*, but he shakes his head, biting his lip to avoid smiling. He fails.

"Okay. Well. It's none of our business what you guys do."

"For the first time in my life I agree with you," Rocío says.

"Really? For the *first time*?" She nods. Ungrateful little gremlin. "If you're happy about this, so are we. But please, don't, um, have intercourse in front of cameras. Unless you're making a sex tape," I rush to add, "in which case just . . . don't do it in public places?"

Kaylee nods silently, looking a smidge less mortified. Rocío rolls her eyes. "Whatever." She takes Kaylee's hand and drags her away. "*You're not my real mother, Bee!*" she yells without turning around.

Levi and I watch them walk away in the late afternoon sunlight. When they're just little dots on the street, he tells me, "That was excellent practice for when we'll have teenage daughters."

My heart skips. *He doesn't mean together, idiot.* "They're young. Their frontal lobes are not fully developed yet."

He takes the car keys out of his pocket and dangles them in front of my face. "Want to process the trauma of our twenty-three-year-olds role-playing on top of your Marie Curie mouse pad while I take you home?"

"They better be going to Kaylee's place."

"Why?"

"The walls between my apartment and Rocío's are very thin."

"You should invest in noise-canceling headphones." He tugs me toward the car. "Order online while I drive."

• • •

"IT JUST SEEMS far-fetched," I say in the passenger seat. "First of all, Rocío's in a relationship. Oh—I wonder if they're poly?"

"Should we be discussing our RAs' love lives?"

"I'd normally say no, but them bumping uglies on my desk automatically grants us a waiver."

He contemplates it. "Fair."

"And—those two are so different from each other."

"You think that's a problem?"

It might not be. They might produce well-rounded children who know how to apply raccoon-style eyeliner *and* glitter. "Okay, it's not. But Rocío *disliked* Kaylee. She kept clamming up whenever Kaylee was around. She made an entire list of things she hated about her."

Levi half smiles. "You sure about that?"

"Yeah. She told me that—" I recall what Levi told me less than one hour ago and shut my mouth. I forgot when Boris's call sent me into emergency mode, but now it's all back, swirling around the forefront of my brain, and with that my heart is heavy in my throat, a liquid warmth in the pit of my stomach, the sense of being on a precipice. I could be falling. I *will* be falling, fast and hard, if only I take one step forward and let myself—

A thought hits me. Smack in the head. Like a freight train.

I gasp. "I've got it."

Levi pulls into my driveway. "What did you say?"

"I got it!"

"Got . . . what?"

"The helmet. BLINK. I know how to fix the compatibility issue—do you have paper? Why don't you have paper in your stupid car?"

"It's a rental—"

"My apartment! I have paper up there!" The car hasn't fully stopped, but I jump out and run upstairs anyway. I unlock the door, hunt down a pen and notebook, and start scribbling as fast as my fingers will go, pitifully out of

breath. A minute later I hear steps behind me and Levi closing the door I left open. Oops.

"I'm assuming you wanted me to follow you in, but if not—"

"Look." I push the notebook under his nose. "We're going to do this. Look at this."

He blinks a few times. "Bee, I don't think this is . . . English."

I turn the notebook around. Shit, I wrote in German. "Okay—*don't* look at this. Just listen to me. And don't be scared. We've been having issues with the switchboard, right? We've been trying to fix it, but . . . what if we just bypass it?"

"But the different frequencies—"

"Right. That's where I'm going to scare you."

"Scare me?"

"Yes." I make room on the table, and start sketching a diagram. "But don't be scared."

"I'm not scared."

"Good. Stay unscared."

"I— Why would I be scared?"

"Because of what I'm about to show you. Which you might find scary." I tap the back of the pen on the top of my diagram. "Okay. We remove the switchboard." I draw a cross on it. "We build separate circuits. And then we leverage the magnetothermal properties of each one—"

"—for speed." Levi's eyes are wide. "And if we have separate circuits —"

"—we can rely on the wireless remote." I grin at him. "Will it work?"

He bites into his lower lip, staring at the diagram. "The wiring will be tricky. And isolating each circuit. But if we work around that . . ." He turns to me with a wide, breathless grin. "This could work. It could really work."

"And it will be so much better than what MagTech is doing."

"We'd have a final prototype in . . . weeks. Days." He rubs his mouth. "This is a fantastic idea."

I jump up and down excitedly. It's obnoxious, but I can't stop myself. Where does all this energy go when I try to run? "Am I a genius, or what?"

He shakes his head even as he says, "You *are*."

"Should we go to the lab? Start working on it?"

"Before the cleaning crew has a chance to disinfect your desk?"

"Good point. But I need to *do* something."

He smiles fondly. "Maybe you can keep jumping up and down?"

"I'm starting to get tired, actually."

"Okay, then . . ." He shrugs, and before I know what's going on I'm in his arms and he's spinning me around, my legs wrapped around his waist and his hands on my thighs.

I laugh. I laugh like I'm happy. What a *weekend*. I'm a feather. I'm invincible. I'm doing science. I'm having *fun*. I'm building things, useful, important things. I'm facing demons from my past. I'm being whirled around when I'm too tired to do it myself. I'm bubbling, exhilarated, brave. I'm the most myself and not myself at all. I'm tightening my hands around Levi's neck, and when he slows down I'm asking him, "Are you going to kiss me?"

No idea where *that* came from. But I'm not sorry it's out there.

His smile doesn't falter, but he shakes his head. "I don't think so," he says quietly. Strands of purple hair brush against his forehead. His cheeks. We are close, *so* close. He smells *so* good.

"Why?"

"Because I'm not sure you want me to kiss you."

"Oh." I nod. My hair tickles his nose. He scrunches it, and I laugh. "What if I told you that I do? Would you kiss me then?"

"I still don't think so," he says calmly. Seriously.

My smile fades. Oh, shit. *Shit*, I made a mess. "You don't want to?" My voice is small, insecure. He shakes his head.

"That's not it."

It must be. What else? "Right." I've been in his arms for a while, but suddenly I feel self-conscious. He's *not* okay with this. He *used* to be attracted to me, but not anymore. I'm overstepping. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to go too far."

“You don’t understand, Bee.” A small smile. Our foreheads touch, his skin warm against mine. I really, *really* want a kiss from this man. I want it bad enough to burn. “You can’t go too far.”

“Then why . . . ?”

His eyes flutter closed. His lips move closer. “I’m terrified that you won’t go far enough.”

When Tim kissed her for the first time—after a screening of *2001: A Space Odyssey*, which I later found out he slept through—eighteen-year-old Bee called her sister to say she’d had the loveliest of kisses. But eighteen-year-old Bee was a fool. Eighteen-year-old Bee had no idea. Eighteen-year-old Bee overrated that Tim wasn’t overly clumsy and brushed his teeth. And twenty-eight-year-old Bee would consider going back in time to slap her upside the head, but she’s busy having a real, true, actual, honest-to-God good kiss.

The best kiss.

It has to do with how slow it starts. With the way Levi and I breathe against each other for a moment, just breathe and taste the air between us. It should feel ridiculous, but there’s something unique about how he looks at my mouth from lowered eyelashes. Wrapped around him like I am, I can feel his pounding heartbeat, the heat of his skin, and suddenly I’m not scared anymore. He wants this—he wants *me*. I know it in the liquid, messy warmth of my abdomen, in the red spreading over his cheekbones, in his breathing, even faster and louder than mine.

“Bee.”

The tension stretches so unbearably tight, we might as well be on different sides of the world. So I close the distance, and then it’s not slow anymore. It’s hard and fast and open-mouthed. Wet and pressing and half bites. It’s messy, the least smooth kiss of my life—but maybe it’s not a kiss at all. Just two people trying to be as close as possible. His hands are sliding up my ass. My nails are in his scalp. He grunts choppy, surprised praise into my throat—“Yeah. *Yeah*.”—licks the dip of my collarbone, and I’m on fire, half a minute of this and I’m already aflame, *pulsating* with want and need.

I have no brakes: I grind myself helplessly against him, my nipples hard against his chest, his hard abs the perfect slate for my core to rub on.

"You are so—" He groans deep, like he's halfway to insane. I'm too busy desperately seeking friction to even try to keep up with my end of the kiss, but it's okay. He's got me. His large palm comes up, wraps around my neck, angles my head sharply, just so. His tongue is inside my mouth, pressing against mine, and . . .

Dirty. This is not a kiss—this is *dirty*. Obscene. He pushes me against the wall, and I push back, and back, and back, like there can be no air between us. His hand under my shirt is possessive, confident, so large that it completely spans my rib cage, and I arch up, swallowing a whimper in the back of my throat. My head is spinning, my body is melting, I can hear bells, and—

Not bells. A phone. Ringing. It slowly penetrates the thick haze of Levi mouthing my breasts, leaving a wet trail over my T-shirt—God *oh God*. "Your phone," I whisper, forcing myself to still my hips. It's the loudest my voice will go. Then one of his hands slips inside the back of my panties, and he starts grinding me up and down on his abs, and I forget what I meant to say. It's the *exact* spot, the *exact* rhythm I'd been trying to reach. He learned it, and he's helping me keep it up, fingers digging into the flesh of my ass. A perfect thrust. He growls, and I whimper at the spear of pleasure. My eyes roll in the back of my head, and . . . Yes. Right against— *Yes*.

There.

"Levi," I gasp. "Your phone—do you maybe want to—*oh*—pick up?" Or we can just continue until the ache disappears. Yes, that would be lovely. And stopping would be *unbearable*. Is that his cock rubbing against my ass? No. Impossible. No one's that big, right?

The phone is still ringing. I'm all about ignoring it, but Levi— I realize that Levi is not ignoring it. Levi is making his way under my shorts, sucking on the spot under my ear, and not even *hearing* it.

"*Levi.*" He doesn't quite snap out of it. He doesn't pull back, doesn't move his mouth from my skin, but he stops. His grip tightens around me. A

child, reluctant to let go of a favorite toy. “Your phone. Do you want to . . . ?”

His eyes are glassy. His hands not fully steady as he lets go of me, gingerly, with difficulty. I watch him try to collect himself for long seconds before he picks up. “Ward.”

He is winded, chest moving up and down. He palms his erection like it hurts, all the while staring at me, *me*, only me. Then he looks away and his demeanor abruptly changes. “Say that again?” The speaker on the other end is female. I can’t make out the words, but I recognize the voice from before. From the picture in his office. “Yeah, of course,” Levi says reassuringly. His voice is still husky, but soft. Caring. Intimate. He turns around and gives me his back, like I’m not here anymore. *They used to date*, a nagging voice provides. *What you just did with Levi? He used to do it with her. And much more.*

“I’ll be right there.”

Reality’s catching up fast. I just—I did *that*. I haven’t been this close to another human being in years, and now—with *Levi*. I liked it, too. I forgot myself and probably all decency, but maybe he didn’t? He’s leaving in the middle of it. Because of a phone call. From a friend. Whom he used to date. Shit. *Shit*—

“Bee?” I look up. His eyes are ablaze. His jeans tented. Okay—he *is* that big. “I need to go.” His throat bobs before and after he says it. He doesn’t seem fully in control. Could I convince him to stay, if I tried?

Probably not. I won’t, anyway. “Of course.”

“I would . . .”

“It’s okay.”

“I will . . .”

“Yeah, you can . . .”

“Yes.”

I’ve no clue what he’s trying to say, and I seriously doubt he knows what *I* mean, since I have no idea myself. We’re talking over each other. Just like we *were* all over each other. *Ba Dum Tss.*

One last glance and he leaves. He's halfway down the stairs when I notice the car keys on the table, on top of the diagram I drew. I grab them and run after him. "Hey, you forgot your keys!"

He stops on the landing and holds out his hand, so I go to him and drop them into his palm. I expect him to leave right after, but he surprises me by stepping closer. Then closer still.

For long moments he just looks at me, eyes full of beautiful, undecipherable green things. My throat constricts, my stomach twists, and I want to tell him that I'm sorry, that it's okay, that I know he made a mistake, that we never need to talk about this, never again. But before I can say anything, he cups my cheek and leans down to kiss me once more.

This time it's sweet, slow, savoring. Patient. This time it's lingering and gentle—everything our other kiss wasn't.

I want to try them all. All the kisses Levi Ward is capable of, I want to sample them like fine wine.

I touch my lips, feel his residual warmth, and don't take my eyes off his back as he disappears.

17

PULVINAR: REACHING & GRASPING

From: Levi-ward@nasa.gov
To: BLINK-CORE-ENGINEERING@MAILSERV, Bee-Koenigswasser@nasa.gov
Re: BLINK—Monday

I'll be taking personal time and I won't be in at all today (Monday). I uploaded three designs for you to work on. Bee came up with a great solution to the hardware/software incompatibility issues, and I want to finalize its implementation ASAP. Reach me via text if you have questions.

LW

I read the email for the seventh time, and for the seventh time I marvel that I was given credit for my idea. Goes to show how low the bar is for cis dudes in STEM, doesn't it? Thank you, Oh Penised Overlords, for the recognition I deserve.

Not that I'm not grateful he introduced the idea, since I'm not sure his underlings would have taken it seriously if it came from me. Remember June 1903, when the Royal Institution invited Dr. Curie to give a lecture and then didn't allow her to lecture because of her inferior lady brain? Pierre ended up speaking for her, even though she was sitting in the audience.

Anyway: the more things change, the more they stay the same. Sausage Referencing™ is still a thing, and sometimes I get angry at myself for the way I accept it.

Sometimes I get angry at myself for other things. Like the fact that I should be working, instead of checking my phone to see if Levi texted. Or the fact that I'm upset he hasn't. Or the fact that suddenly I care to be updated about what he's doing every second of every minute of every day.

It's not my business, anyway. He has stuff to do. With his ex. Maybe if Tim hadn't cheated on me for a number of years that cannot be counted on the fingers of one hand I wouldn't think twice about this. But Levi's lack of an explanation has me wondering whether he's hiding something. Don't get me wrong—I'm aware that our kiss meant nothing to him. So he had a crush on me in grad school? Big deal. It's been six years. Lots of things changed dramatically in the past six years. The writing on *Game of Thrones*. The importance of hand sanitizer. My opinions on duck penises. But it was still a *kiss*. If Levi's in a relationship with someone else . . . yikes. Is he Tim 2.0? No, he's not that verminous. He wouldn't. But aren't all men the same?

Is my head exploding?

"Are you picturing me and Kay doing it?"

I startle. Rocío is sitting at her desk, black Dr. Martens propped next to her keyboard and a pink lollipop in her mouth. "How long have you been here?"

"Like, five minutes. You were staring into the distance with a weird deer-in-the-headlights expression, so . . ." She stops sucking with a loud pop. "So, was it me and Kay? On your desk?"

"I'm pretty sure this is sexual harassment."

"I don't mind."

"No, *you* are harassing *me*—" I sigh and shake my head. She's impossible. I want to adopt her and keep her in my life forever. "Is everything okay?"

She nods, sticking the lollipop back into her mouth.

"Is that . . . strawberry?"

"Bubblegum. Kay gave it to me."

"Kay, huh?"

"Yup."

I clear my throat. "I was thinking about a recent conversation we had, in which you told me you weren't exactly a fan of . . . *Kay*, and—"

Rocío's boots hit the floor. Hard. "I love her," she declares. "She's perfect. I want her to be my beautiful California Bride with pink ribbons in her hair. I want to give her bubble baths that smell like cotton candy. I want to buy her fruity cocktails with little umbrellas in them." She leans forward, pinning me with her gaze. "I will wear glitter for her, Bee. Black glitter."

I'm a little out of breath at the intensity. "Does Alex know?"

"I broke up with him. Told him he wasn't pink enough." She shrugs. "He barely cares."

I grin. "I'm *so* happy for you."

She sobers up. "Don't be. Life is pain and then you die."

"Ah, yes. I forgot."

"Anyway. It's more important than ever that I get into Johns Hopkins's neuro program, since that's where Kay's going. So we decided to redirect the time and efforts we spent on GRE prep to GRE destruction."

"Destruction?"

"We're joining #FairGraduateAdmissions. It's a whole movement now. People are fundraising, building awareness, pressuring grad programs to drop the test. We're going to help organize." There's a savage gleam in her eyes. "I've spent hundreds of dollars and hours on that test, Bee. *Hundreds*. I will get my revenge—especially after that stupid *Chronicle of Higher Ed* article."

I have no idea what article she's talking about, but I find it easily. It's an op-ed by a Benjamin Green—who, a quick Google search informs me, is a VP at STC. The company that sells the GRE.

CHALLENGING THE CHALLENGERS: What #FairGraduateAdmissions gets wrong

> The new trend is to do away with the GRE, which has been widely used by graduate admission committees for decades. @WhatWouldMarieDo was the first to use her platform to bring attention to the "injustice" it perpetuates, and @Shmacademics helped her amplify the signal by posting reviews of the literature debunking it. Together, the two have almost two million followers. But who are these influencers? What vast monetary operations are behind them? Do they have financial ties with STC competitors? Moreover, these influencers do not provide useful alternatives to the GRE. They talk of holistic admission protocols, but fully reading thousands of applications is too time consuming for admission committees . . .

My eyes roll to the back of my skull. Committees need to do right by applicants and should make the time. And who's this dude? This one-man homeowners' association? What's a "vast monetary operation"? I want to break into his house and show him that my salary is probably what he tips his pool boy—and none of it comes from Twitter. But I don't know where Mr. Green lives, so I just DM Shmac the link.

> **MARIE:** Did you see this stupid article? Benjamin Green is officially Camel Dick 2.0.

My eyes fall on the messages he sent the last time we talked, when he told me about the girl. My chest clenches, and for some reason I think of

Levi. Of him being gone. Of what his opinion on the GRE might be. Maybe I'm going insane.

I don't wait for Shmac's response. I log out of the app and force myself to go back to work.

• • •

"WHAT?"

"Listen—"

"What?!"

"It's—"

"What?"

"I—"

"What?!"

I sigh. "Okay, Reike. Let me know when you're done."

My sister yells "What?!" eight more times. "Okay, it's out of my system. Let us resume. So, you and The Wardass smooched—"

"Feels like there should be a better word for that."

"You sucked faces. Exchanged germs. Swapped saliva. Canoodled. Snogged."

"The other day you told me in great detail about that Ukrainian guy you pegged, and I didn't make half the fuss."

"It's different."

"Why?"

"Because I'm a seasoned pegger, but you *never* do this. You were all like, 'Neuro's my wife now, zip up my chastity belt, dig a moat around the Bee-fence,' and now you're making out with your nemesis who is apparently into you—"

"Was. *Was* into me. And it's just a kiss." If I say it enough, maybe it'll erase how close I got to being naked with Levi on my kitchen floor. How I've been obsessing over his whereabouts all day long.

"FYI, I'll return to the States for your wedding, but I recently discovered the bridezilla subreddit, and I'm *not* going to dye my hair blond to fit the

ceremony's color scheme—"

"Not happening."

"Right, you'd probably ask for teal green—still a resounding no."

"Reike, it was just . . . a kiss. He doesn't care. And *I* have no intention of caring ever again. One round of returning wedding gifts was enough."

"I never got mine back!"

"You never sent one. Anyway, it was just a kiss. Purely . . ." Physical. Burning. Good. Electric. Obscene. Heavy. Dangerous. Good. Wild. Good, good, *good*. The most erotic moment of my life. But my head has cooled off, I'm not a horny black hole of sexual tension anymore, and I can see how dumb it was. A stupid idea. Three out of ten, would *not* do again. Plus, I have other concerns. BLINK. My job. Who'll feed Félicette once I'm gone. "Nothing. Purely nothing."

"Right. Emotions are still scary. Boundary maintenance is a priority. The Bee-fence is up in arms. So when you see him at work tomorrow—"

"I'll be too busy building the best damn helmet this world has ever seen and securing myself a lifetime of professional stability. Away from Trevor."

"Of course. And I assume The Wardass is perfectly okay pretending that —"

A knock at my door and I glance at the time—10:28 p.m. "Gotta go. It's probably Rocío coming to reiterate that I'm not her real mother. Or that after you die the enzymes in your digestive tract devour your body from the inside."

"Of all your colleagues, this girl is my absolute favorite."

"She was caught *porking*. On *my desk*."

"How does she constantly top herself?"

I roll my eyes. "Bye, Reike."

"Warmest regards, Beetch."

It's not Rocío. Instead, there's a large chest where her head should be. And several inches above that, Levi's face. "You forgot this in the rental." He lifts his left hand, my backpack dangling from his fingers.

"Oh. Thank you." I hug it to the front of my body. I'm wearing a sleeveless top I've owned since middle school and pajama pants that could

moonlight as underwear. I really thought it'd be Rocío at the door. I may be blushing all over. "Did you, um, want to come in?"

He shakes his head. "I just wanted to return the backpack."

I nod. He nods. There's a stretch of silent, more awkward nodding, and then he says, "I'll get going."

"Yeah. Sure. Have a good night."

He's wearing a light blue Henley that does marvelous things for his back. Which I have now touched. Extensively. That's why I stare as he walks away: I'm mesmerized by how broad, firm, solid he looks. And that's why when he reaches the stairs and turns around he finds me still there. Still looking.

He smiles. And I smile. The smiles linger, warm, honest, and I hear myself ask, "You sure you don't want to come in?"

"It's not that I . . ." His throat works. "I didn't come here for that."

"I didn't think you did." I make room for him, and with a few tentative, lumbering steps he's inside. In all his hulking, massive grace. He looks around, running a hand through his hair. Is he thinking about what happened here twenty-four hours ago? Well, more like twenty-eight point five, but which maniac is counting?

"Is that a hummingbird feeder?" he asks.

"Yep."

"Any hummingbirds?"

"Not yet."

"Me neither. In my garden, I mean."

"I noticed the mint you're growing." We exchange another smile. "Want to sit on the balcony? I have fancy German beer."

The chairs I comfortably sprawl on look like kid's furniture under Levi. His hand dwarfs the beer bottle. His profile, as he stares pensively at the Houston skyline, is unbearably handsome. He looks almost aggressively out of place. I want to know what he's thinking about. I want to ask if he regrets our kiss. I want to touch him again.

"I'm sorry about the other night. And about missing work when we're at a critical point. It was an emergency."

Oh. "Was it . . . was it something about your non-wife? From the photo?"

He chuckles. "I can't believe the conversation material that picture's giving us."

"Amazing, huh?"

His smile fades. "Penny's ill. Epilepsy. It's under control, but she's growing up fast and her meds need to be adjusted often. It's tricky, finding the right dosage."

"I'm sorry."

"It's okay. Weirdly enough, Penny takes it in stride. She's a remarkably resourceful kid." He takes a swig and makes a face at the beer. What a heathen. "Lily, though—her mom—she struggles. Understandably. I try to be around when things get bad."

I stare into the distance. Of course he does. He's that kind of person. "I'm glad they have you."

"I'm pretty useless. I mostly play UNO with Penny, or buy her slime that has some toxic ingredient—"

"Borax."

"—that drives Lily crazy. Yes, Borax. How did you know?"

"I have mom friends. They complain about it." I shrug. "Where's her dad?"

"He died a little over a year ago." He hesitates before adding, "Rock-climbing accident." For a moment I don't think much of it. Then I remember the picture in his office. Levi and the tall, dark-haired man.

"Were you related?"

"No." His expression darkens. "But I'd known him forever. Since kindergarten. We'd line up in pairs till the end of elementary school. Peter Sullivan and Levi Ward. Not many T, U, or V names, apparently."

I set my bottle on the table and study his face. Sullivan. That name again. It's common, that's why it crops up so often. And yet . . .

"Like the prototype?" I murmur. "Like the Discovery Institute?"

I wish he'd look at me. But he keeps staring at the city and says, "I didn't even want to be an engineer. I wanted to major in veterinary science.

Had even declared it, but Peter convinced me to take an engineering class as an elective. We did this project together—we built an olfactory cortex. A piece of hardware that could correctly identify smells. He did most of the work and had to teach me everything, but it was a blast. Thinking that something like that could maybe be used for patients, you know? Somewhere down the line?"

"That's impressive."

"It wasn't *always* correct." He bites the inside of his cheek. "On our final presentation, while the instructor was examining it, the cortex announced that it was smelling feces." I burst into laughter. "It maybe needed a few tweaks. But I fell in love with brain-computer interface because of Peter. He was the most brilliant engineer I've ever met." He presses his lips together. "I saw his skull crack in two when he fell. I was ten feet away, halfway through my climb. The noise—it was unlike anything. I didn't know how to tell Lily. And Penny wouldn't leave the room . . ."

His voice is so deceptively level, so painfully neutral, I'm shocked when I realize that my cheeks are wet. I want to reach out to Levi. I *need* to reach out. But I'm locked inside my head, paralyzed, finally making connections and understanding things.

"They renamed the Institute after him. And he came up with the prototype." Before dying. That's why Levi needed to be on BLINK. Why it needed to happen with him in charge. Why he fought so hard for it.

Levi. *Oh, Levi*.

"I'm going to build those helmets." He's still staring into the distance. His grip on the bottle is a vise. "Like he envisioned them. And they'll have his name. And Penny will know it was her dad, and she—" He stops. Like his voice will break if he continues.

Suddenly, I'm not scared anymore. I know what to do—or at least what I *want* to do. I stand, slide the beer out of Levi's hand, and set it on the metal railing with a clink. Then I lower myself into his lap, legs on each side of his waist, my arms around his neck. I wait until his hands are around my waist. Until his eyes shine up at me in the darkness. Then I say, "We're

going to build those helmets. Together." I smile fiercely against his lips. "Peter will know. Penny will know. Lily will know. And you will know."

The kiss is a punch-out drug, but a familiar one. After all, I've thought about nothing else for the past day. Pleasure hums through me with every stroke of his tongue against mine, every brush of his fingers against my lower back, every reverent breath against my jaw. He pulls me closer and groans into my skin, half sentences that drive me crazy an inch at a time.

"You're so— *Fuck*, Bee," as I run my teeth down his throat. "I used to dream of you," when my fingertips brush against the fine hair underneath his belly button. "I'm going to—we have to slow down, or I'm going to—" after I start rocking on top of him, and the friction of his erection against my clit is already the best sex I've ever had. I'm shuddering, pulsating, about to explode with pleasure. My underwear is soaked and I want to get closer. *Closer*.

But our clothes stay on. Frustratingly, maddeningly on, even when he brings me to bed, the kitchen light trickling inside the room. Levi's grip on my hip is near-bruising, every breath a sharp intake. My body feels warm, buoyant, filled with cutting heat. He looks down at me and says, "I want to fuck you." He nips at my collarbone, and—he likes teeth. To bite, to clutch, to suck. There's something devouring about him, something clumsy and overeager, but it's not a turnoff. He's usually so patient, meticulous, but now he can't wait. Can't have enough. "Can I fuck you?"

I nod up at him, let him take my top, my pants, *everything* off, and the way he looks at me like he has found answers all of a sudden, like my body is a religious experience, has me squirming up for contact.

"This," he says breathlessly, his thumb tracing reverently the piercing on my nipple.

"If you don't like it, I—"

He shushes me, and it's okay. I'm okay. I'm totally okay with him staring at my small breasts as though they're something wondrous, with him kissing them until his lips are plump, until I have to pull at his hair, until I'm so wet, I feel it trickle down my thigh. I'm okay with being told

ridiculous things: I'm a good girl, I'm perfect, I've been driving him insane, when he first saw me I changed the chemistry of his brain.

He makes me laugh when I roll us around, push him underneath me, his elbows smacking against the hard wall. He mumbles a few obscenities, but when I bend down to kiss him again he forgets all about it. "You're too big for the bed," I tell him between giggles, peeling his shirt from his skin. He has abs. Defined ones. And pecs. He has muscle groups I thought were myths.

"Your bed's too small for me. Next time we'll do this in mine," he says, lifting his hips and letting me undo his zipper. The sound of each catch fills the room, and it shouldn't be so erotic, but I'm naked on top of him, his length rubbing against my core, and there's no mistaking how deliciously, furiously, eagerly big he is.

"It's been a while," he says.

I blink at him, breathless, hazy. "Yeah. Me too." I can't help myself. I touch the damp head of his erection, just a brush of my fingertips. He grunts, bites his lip. His hips jerk. It's a little like riding a horse. A bull.

"Do we need a condom?" he asks. I shake my head and mouth "birth control," eager to continue. "This might be over very quickly," he husks, hands gripping my thighs as I position him at my entrance. "But I'll make it up to you. With my mouth. Or my fingers. If— Bee. *Bee*."

I don't know what I expected from having Levi inside of me. Probably the same as with Tim: something vaguely pleasant. At best, sex made me feel close to him. At worst, I was bored for a few minutes and remembered that taxes were due soon. With Levi it's nothing like that. I'm in control. I'm easing his cock into my body. I struggle inch by inch to adjust, to accommodate, but it's my decision. I close my eyes and feel my face twist, half pleasure and half pain. I need more. He needs more. We both need more, and I push down to take him farther inside, thighs and hands trembling as I strain to fill myself with him, and . . .

I can't do it.

There is no room. I try again, grinding down to take more of him. My skin beads with sweat. The sense of fullness grows, turns into a sting of

pain, but I push through it, force myself to—

"Slow down," Levi orders, a little more than a growl. His hands clasp my hips to still me.

I open my eyes. Shake my head. "I need to—"

"You need a minute," he says firmly, and his voice brooks no argument. We're both shaking, gasping, sweaty against each other, but I pause for a moment, and he nods, choppy, pleased. "Good girl."

He stares at me like he doesn't know where to settle his eyes. Then he finds the place where we're joined and starts touching me there, slow, wet strokes of his thumb on my clit that soften me and help me take him all the way. His hip bones press into the undersides of my thighs when he bottoms out. I feel my channel clench and grip him, and his groan tells me that he does, too. He's in me to the hilt, and I collapse on top of him.

"Levi," I stutter into his mouth. "You are *really* big."

Something vibrates between us. Not physical—a feeling. It resonates in my body and in my brain.

"You'll get used to me," he gasps against my temple, pushing my hair back from my forehead with trembling hands, and then I am so full, I cannot be still anymore. I roll my hips to test the waters, see what hurts (very little) and what's good (a whole lot). I learn what I want. Which angle. Which rhythm. In exchange, I let Levi's hands roam my body wherever he likes—and it's *everywhere*. There are wet, filthy, shameful sounds, but I don't care, too busy gripping the headboard and grinding myself against that spot inside me which— Yes. *Yes*. He's immense, stretching me to my limit and a bit past. I balance myself on his chest. His heart beats a drum against my palm, and I move up and down. Delicious pressure. Pleasure pulses deep in my belly. "Like this?" I ask.

He doesn't answer. Or he does, but in murmurs, incoherent little things, like *Please, Be still, Don't move, You're so tight*, *I'm going to— Oh, shit*. It gets worse when I clench around him on purpose, just to see where I can go. There's no extra room inside me. Nothing at all, and my vision dots. My pulse spikes. My head snaps blank, my lungs void of air, and I come like an

avalanche, a wash of blinding pleasure as my body contracts rhythmically. I whimper my orgasm into the skin of his collarbone.

When I can think again, I find Levi on top of me, panting against my throat, fingers tight around my hips. He babbles, groans, desperately grinds his cock against my stomach, but he has pulled out. I am painfully empty, clenching against nothing.

"Did you—?" My voice is hoarse.

"I'm trying to make it last," he pants. "I don't want this to end." I try to guide him into me once again, but he pins my wrists above my head and kisses me, endless, deep, without restraint, swallowing my soft whimpers in his mouth. Then he slides back inside. In this position he gets deeper. Harder. Different angles. He covers me, all of me, and I let him do what *he* let me do: find his pleasure in my body. His thrusts are shallow, then slow, then deep. Then his control snaps in two, long movements that drag delicious friction against all of my nerve endings. I love his weight on me. I love his guttural groans. I love the absent, awestruck green of his eyes. I'm so close. So close again.

This is good. He is good. We are good. Together. Like this.

"Bee," he slurs against my cheek. "Bee. You are everything I—"

My hands slide against his sweat-slick back, and I hold him together as he shatters into a million pieces.

18

RAPHE NUCLEI: HAPPINESS

"AMAZING." GUY'S VOICE trembles slightly, a tinge of fear to his admiration. Awe, I guess it's called? All that matters is that it opens the floodgates for everyone else to speak up.

"Incredible."

"—we have a working prototype—"

"—can't believe there was such a simple solution—"

"—BLINK is basically done—"

"—such an elegant way of—"

"*Fucking* awesome," Rocío declares, the loudest voice. Everyone looks at her, and that's when the impressed whispers become more like a frat party. High fives, hugs, the occasional chant. I'm surprised a keg isn't suddenly produced out of thin air.

Levi leans against a bench on the opposite side of the room, wearing last night's Henley. This morning I offered him my stretchy tie-dye camisole, but he just glared at me. Ingrate. He notices I'm staring and we both look away, bashful to have been caught. Then our eyes lock again. This time, we share a smile.

"We should celebrate!" someone's yelling. We ignore him and keep on smiling.

The first time Tim and I had sex, I was terrified he hadn't enjoyed it. He didn't call me for two days, which I spent wondering if I was shit in bed—instead of focusing on how shitty *he* was. In the fight that ended our engagement, he accused me of pushing him to sleep with other women because I was "a total starfish" during sex (I had to google what that even meant after he left). On reflection, our relationship was bookended by Tim making me feel terrible about myself. How poetic.

Maybe in the past years I've learned to give considerably fewer fucks about what dudes think of me, and that's why I've spent zero seconds of the last twenty-four hours wondering whether Levi thinks I'm a shit lay. But maybe that's not the only reason. Maybe it has to do with the way he looked at me this morning, when I woke up on top of him in my twin bed that he accused of being "an instrument of torture repurposed as a piece of furniture." Maybe it was the quiet, sweetly bashful conversation we had about me being on birth control, and about the fact that we've both been living like ascetic monks for long enough that we're sure to be clean. Maybe it's the appalled face he made when he saw me guzzle unsweetened soy milk directly from the carton. Maybe it's the swift, covert glances he's been giving me all day long.

We haven't talked much. Or—we've talked a lot. About circuits and high-frequency stimulation trains and Brodmann areas. The usual.

Today's not usual, though.

"Looks like you got it." Boris comes to stand beside me. He glances at his engineers—currently giving one another celebratory wedgies—with mild disapproval.

"We still need to tweak the neuro software. Then we'll test the model on the first astronaut. Guy has volunteered." A euphemism: Guy *begged* to be test subject number one. It's nice knowing that someone else is so invested in BLINK.

"When's that?"

"Next week."

He nods. "I'm going to set up a demonstration for the end of next week, then."

“A demonstration?”

“I’ll invite my bosses, your bosses. They’ll invite someone higher up still.”

I stare at him, alarmed. “That’s way too soon. We have weeks before the project deadline, and there’s lots to troubleshoot. Human subjects are involved—plenty of things could go wrong.”

“Yes.” He gives me a level look. “But you know what the stakes are, especially with MagTech so close to catching up. And you know the pushback against the project. We’ve got lots of eyes on us. Lots of people who know very little about science, and yet are very invested in BLINK.”

I hesitate. Ten days is much fewer than I’m comfortable with. On the other hand, I understand the pressure Boris is under. After all, he’s the one who got us approval to start. “Okay. We’ll do our best.” I push away from the bench. “I’ll tell Levi.”

“Wait.” I stop. “Bee, what are your plans when this is over?”

“My plans?”

“You want to keep working for Trevor?” I press my lips together to temporize, but Boris is no fool. “I’ve chatted with him a few times. He seems to be under the impression that we’re making suits?”

“Trevor is . . .” I sigh. “Yeah.”

He gives me a commiserating look. “If the prototype’s a success, NIH will likely promote you, maybe give you your own lab. You’ll have options. But if you don’t like those options . . . come see me, please.”

I stare at him wide-eyed. “What?”

“I’ve been wanting to start a dedicated neuroscience team. This”—he points at the helmet—“is one of *many* things we can do. Our neuro unit is scattered and underutilized. I need someone who can actually lead it.” He smiles tiredly. “Anyway, I’ll go tell Levi about the demonstration. I’m partial to the way he scowls when I give him bad news.”

I stand there like an idiot, blinking into the distance. Was I just offered a job? At NASA? *Leading* a lab? Did I hallucinate? Is there a carbon monoxide leak in the building?

“You coming out to celebrate?” Guy asks, startling me.

I shake my head. Celebration seems premature. “But you guys have fun.”

“Sure will.” His eyes lift to a spot above my head. “And you?”

I turn around. Levi is right behind me. “Another time.”

“You have plans?” I ask once Guy has left. I look around to make sure we’re alone, like I’m asking Levi for his secret apple pie recipe. I’m ridiculous.

“I *was* going to spend some quality time with my cat.”

“Expression night?”

“Schrödinger and I do sometimes have interactions that don’t involve his rectum,” he points out. “But no. There’s a restaurant. Vegan.” His eyes wander away, as though he’s embarrassed to ask. “I’ve been wanting to try it. We could . . .”

I laugh. “You don’t have to.”

He gives me a curious look. “Do what?”

“Take me out. On a date.”

He scowls. “I know I don’t have to.”

“I’m aware this isn’t . . .” I start to tell him that I know it’s not like that between us. That he doesn’t need to take me out. That the sex was excellent, and even though I’m sore and sleepy and possibly all orgasmed out, I’d be happy to have more. With him. If he’s interested. I’m familiar with the concept of friends with benefits. Bed buddies. Frenefits. Fuckfriends. But then I remember the weekend. Watching Star Wars together, drinking Sazerac. This friendship of ours is older than the benefits, even if just by a few hours, and I’d be happy to spend time *talking* with him. Plus, he probably has no one to try vegan restaurants with. I’m the same in Bethesda. Yeah, that’s why he’s asking me out. “Actually, that sounds amazing. Do we need a reservation?”

He lifts one eyebrow. “It’s a vegan restaurant in Texas. We’ll be fine.”

I know how this is going to be: *Levi* will get to work out of his system whatever’s left of his years-old attraction toward me; *I* will finally get to have some decent sex; we’ll *both* get to do so without the pressure of being in a relationship and the disastrous stickiness that always happens when you

let yourself care too much about someone. Tonight's dinner is not going to be a date—just a meal between two horny friends who happen to share dietary preferences. Still, I find myself putting more care than usual into my appearance. I choose a thin rose-gold septum ring, my favorite piercings, and classic red lipstick. I curl my hair to fall in waves down my shoulders. I'm ready well before Levi's supposed to pick me up, so I go wait on the balcony.

Shmac has finally gotten back to me, apologetic for having been offline for *the best, then worst, then best weekend of my life*.

SHMAC: STC is grasping. Everyone knows you have no financial interests and are supporting #FairGraduateAdmissions because you believe in it.

MARIE: I hate what they said about fair admissions being impractical. Who cares? We can and must do better.

SHMAC: Orally.

MARIE: ???

SHMAC: *Totally.

SHMAC: Sorry, speech to text. I'm driving.

MARIE: LOL!

MARIE: Where are you going? And, does it have to do with your best-then-worst-then-best weekend? And does that have to do with The Girl?

SHMAC: I'm taking her out for dinner.

MARIE: djhsgasgarguyfgquergqe

MARIE: (That was a keyboard smash, in case text-to-speech is failing you)

SHMAC: It was, thank you.

MARIE: I'm soooo happy for you, Shmac!

SHMAC: I am, too. Though she's still a bit skittish.

MARIE: Skittish?

SHMAC: For valid reasons. But I don't think she's quite ready to admit it to herself.

MARIE: Admit what?

SHMAC: That I'm serious about this. That I'm in it for the long haul. Or at least for as long as she'll have me.

I frown. Wait—isn't the girl in a relationship? There's no long haul unless she divorces, is there? I want to ask, but I wouldn't want Shmac to think that I'm judging him for taking up with a married woman—I really don't, especially since her husband sounds like someone I wouldn't mind pushing down the Eiffel Tower stairs. I consider telling him that I, too, am going out for dinner—with Camel Dick, no less—but I hear a soft noise.

A little ball of red and gray is hovering in midair around the feeder, pretty wings beating happily at a fluttering rhythm. The first hummingbird of the year. "Hey, beauty." He sticks his thin beak into one hole and leaves before I can take a picture. I watch him fly over the parking lot and notice Levi's truck pulling up.

I run downstairs like I'm eleven and heading to the splash pad. "I got my first hummingbird!" I say excitedly, climbing into the truck. Levi has barely finished parking. "Red throat! I didn't get a picture but they're territorial, so he'll be back. And I'll have the coconut-ginger chickpea soup! My sister says that it's uncool to read restaurant menus online, but I fully embrace my

obsession with food. . . .” I stop. Levi is staring at me open-mouthed. “I have hummingbird shit on my face, don’t I?”

He keeps staring.

“Do you have a tissue?” I look around the cabin. “Or even a piece of paper—”

“No. No, you don’t . . .” He shakes his head, lost for words.

“What’s wrong?”

“You . . .” He swallows.

“. . . I?”

“The dress. You wore . . . the dress.”

I glance at myself. Oh. Yes. I did wear my Target dress. “I thought you said you didn’t really hate it?”

“And I don’t.” He swallows. “I *really* don’t.”

I take a better look at him and realize the *way* he’s staring. Which is . . . “Oh.” My heartbeat picks up.

“Can I kiss you?” he asks, and I could fall in love with this hesitant, shy version of Levi Ward—the same man who nibbled my throat awake at three a.m. to say that he’d die if he couldn’t fuck me again. I let him, enthusiastically. Just like I let him kiss me now, until we’re making out like teenagers, deep, fingers holding my neck, tongues stroking, his weight pressing me into the seat and he’s really, really good at this, charmingly assertive, deliciously insistent. That’s his hand on my knee, under my dress and up my smooth leg, up and up until it’s wrapped around my inner thigh. A light brush against the front of my panties, and I whimper in his mouth just as he groans. I think I’m already wet. And he *knows* I’m already wet, because his fingertips slip under the elastic and hook it to the side. I gasp against his mouth and his thumb slides against my—

Someone honks one street over, and we both pull back. Oops.

“We should probably . . .”

“Yeah. We should.”

We’re both in agreement. And both reluctant. We’re slow to let go of each other, and when he turns the key in the ignition, the same hand that uses precision screwdrivers on a daily basis is trembling slightly.

I glance out the window. “Levi?”

“Yeah?”

“I just wanted to say that . . .” I smile. “Red lipstick looks great on you.”

• • •

IT’S NOT A date.

But if it were—which it isn’t—it would be the best date of my life.

Of course, because it’s *not* a date, the point is moot.

But. *If* it were.

Though it’s not.

Even when, I must admit, it almost feels like one. Maybe it’s that he paid while I was in the bathroom (I briefly protested, but honestly, I’ll let any dude buy me dinner until the gender pay gap is ungapped). Maybe it’s that we never stopped talking, never, not even for a minute—just polite nods for Archie the Overzealous Waiter when he kept coming by to inquire about our meals. But maybe it’s the hour we spent reframing some of our most traumatic grad school memories.

“I presented my data during lab meeting. Halfway through my first year. And you looked out the window for *the entire time*.”

He smiles and takes his time chewing. “You were wearing this”—he gestures in the middle of his forehead—“thing. On your hair.”

“A headband, probably. I was smack in my boho-chic phase.” I shudder. “Okay, you’ve got a doctor’s note for this one. But it was *excellent* data.”

“I know—I was listening. Your salience network research—very compelling. I just . . .” He shrugs. His hand closes around his glass, but he doesn’t drink. “It was cute. I didn’t want to stare.”

I burst into laughter. “Cute?”

His eyebrow lifts, challenging. “Some of us haven’t outgrown their boho-chic phase.”

“Uh-huh. What does boho-chic mean, Levi?”

“It’s a . . . city? In France?”

I laugh harder. “Okay. Another one. That time that friend of yours from microbiology came into lab. That guy you played baseball with?”

“Dan. Basketball. I’ve never played baseball in my life—I’m not even sure how it works.”

“A bunch of guys stand around in their jammies and chat amiably. Anyway, Dan came into lab to pick you up for a game of *a sport*, and you introduced him to everyone except for me.”

He nods. Tears off a piece of bread. Doesn’t eat it. “I remember.”

“We can agree it was a dick move.”

“Or.” He drops the bread, leaning back. “Or, we could agree that a few nights before, after a few drinks, I blurted out to Dan that I was . . . *interested* in a girl named Bee, that Bee’s not a common name, and that Dan was totally the kind of person to look you in the eye and ask, ‘Aren’t you that chick my bro blubbers about when he’s sloshed?’ ”

My heart skips a beat, but I power through. “You can’t have an excuse for every single time you acted like a dick.”

He shrugs. “Try me.”

“The dress code. A few weeks ago.”

He covers his eyes. “You mean, when I asked you to dress professionally while I was wearing a T-shirt with a hole in the right armpit?”

“Were you really?”

“Most of my T-shirts have armpit holes. Statistically speaking, yes.”

“What’s the excuse?”

He sighs. “That morning, Boris said something to me about how he thought NASA might use whatever they could to get NIH off their backs. He said, ‘I wouldn’t be surprised if they got rid of her because of the hair.’ It was probably a throwaway line, but I panicked.” He lifts his hands. “Then you called me out for promoting gender bias in the workplace, and I felt like a Bond villain bragging about his doomsday device.”

“I can’t believe you didn’t just *tell* me.” In retaliation, I pluck a broccoli rabe from his plate.

“I’m an excellent communicator with outstanding interpersonal skills, according to my résumé.”

“Mine says that I’m fluent in Portuguese, but the last time I tried to order food in Coimbra I accidentally told the waiter that there was a bomb in the bathroom. Okay, last one: What about when you refused to collaborate? I overheard you through the door. You told Sam you didn’t want to be on the project because of me.”

“You overheard me?” He sounds skeptical. “Through Sam’s solid wood slab of a door?”

I bat my eyes angelically. “Yes.”

“Were you eavesdropping in the ficus?”

“Perhaps. Anything to say in your defense?”

“Did you leave right after I mentioned that I didn’t want the project because of you?”

“Yup. I stomped my way to my office with the rage of a murder of dragons.”

“Is that their collective noun?”

“It should be.”

He nods. “If you left right after you heard your name, then you didn’t hear everything I told Sam. And that misunderstanding is on you.”

I scowl. “Is it?”

“Yup. There’s a lesson for all of us here.” He picks up the piece of bread he dropped earlier.

“Which would be? Don’t eavesdrop in the ficus?”

“Nope. If you eavesdrop, you shouldn’t half-ass it.” He pops the bread into his mouth, and has the audacity to grin at me.

• • •

SCHRÖDINGER REMEMBERS ME. Possibly from the other night, when he slept on my windpipe, gave me suffocation nightmares, and left black tufts of hair in my mouth. He slinks from his spot on the couch the moment

we come in and twines himself around my bare ankles while Levi stores our leftovers in his fridge.

"I love you," I coo at him. "You're a perfect, magnificent beast, and I'll protect you with my life. I will slay a murder of dragons for you."

"I looked it up," Levi says from the doorjamb. "It's a thunder of dragons."

"Fascinating." I rub the underside of Schrödinger's chin. He squints in feline bliss. "But we like 'murder' better, don't we? Yes, we do." I glance up. "I believe I was promised some anal expression?"

He shakes his head. "It was to lure you here. Don't believe everything you're told."

"You heard that, Schrödinger? Your daddy uses your malfunctioning glands as bait."

Levi smiles. "He's not like that, usually."

"Hmm?"

"Schrödinger's shy with most people. Hides under the couch a lot. He used to be very aggressive with my . . ." The way he trails off has me dying to know.

"Your?"

He shrugs and looks away. "I lived with a girlfriend. For a few months."

"Oh." The cat flops on his side into a waterfall of purrs. "Lily?"

"Before her."

I think I can stop lying to myself and the tiny porcelain frog that passes as my brain and just admit that Levi is the perfect combination of Sexy Guy™, Handsome Guy™, and Cute Guy™. You know when you've been in love with someone for years, and then they do something horrible, like forgetting to water your Chia Pet unicorn or screwing your best friend, and you stop seeing them through rose-colored lenses? All their shortcomings are thrown in sharp relief, like you just put on 3D glasses for inside ugliness? Well, now that I've gotten rid of my asshole goggles, I can acknowledge that Levi's been eligible-bacheloring it up just fine. He'll make some lucky girl an even luckier girl someday. And I have no idea why the idea of him having a live-in girlfriend sends that cold tingle in my belly

—we've been fuckbuddies for less than twenty-four hours, for cake's sake. It's not my business, and the last thing I want is another relationship doomed to a messy, painful ending (i.e., *any* romantic relationship).

"Schrödinger didn't like her?" He gnaws lovingly on my thumb.

"To be fair, she was a dog person."

"When was this?" I ask, as nosy as a curtain-twitcher.

"In grad school. Before . . ." He doesn't finish the sentence, but his gaze lingers on me for a moment, and I wonder if he meant "Before *you*."

Annie used to have a funny theory: we all have a Year Zero around which the calendars of our lives pivot. At some point you meet someone, and they become so important, so metamorphic, that ten, twenty, sixty-five years down the line you look back and realize that you could split your existence in two. Before they showed (BCE), and your Common Era. Your very own Gregorian calendar.

I used to think Tim was my Common Era, but I don't anymore. In fact, I don't *want* another flaky, fickle human being to become my Common Era. You know what would work great as a pivotal lifetime point? Me, getting my own NIH lab—which, I'm thrilled to say, is closer than ever. I almost want to text Annie to ask if new jobs can be Year Zeros, but I'm not quite there yet. Still, it's nice to know that I could. That the door between us is ajar.

Levi wasn't going to say "Before you," because I'm *not* his Common Era. I don't care to be. But I'm positive he'll meet her soon. Probably a girl who's five eleven, knows how to build a microwave from scratch, and has the astounding grace of Simone Biles. They'll produce fierce, athletic kids with scarily smart brains and have sex every night, even when there are grant deadlines, even when the in-laws are in the guest room. Hummingbirds will flock to their yard during the spring months, and Levi will study them from his screened-in porch and be implacably happy—just like I'll be happy with my lab, my research, my students, my RAs (Yes, they'll all be women. No, I don't care if you think it's unfair).

But I'm glad I found out that Levi used to like me. I'm glad I get to have excellent sex for the first time in my life. I'm glad we're doing this

sleeping-together thing without all the ugly that comes from actually investing in a relationship. I'm glad we can be part of each other's BCE for a while. I'm glad to be here. With him. I might even be *happy*.

"I think you're the best," I say, ruffling the fur around Schrödinger's ears. "He's very small."

"Runt of the litter."

I smile at the perfect beany underside of his paws. "I've always loved an underdog. Undercat?"

"I'm surprised someone who likes cats as much as you doesn't . . ."

"Have one?"

"I was going to say five."

I chuckle. "There *is* Félicette . . ."

"I was thinking more of *existing* cats."

I glare at him. "I'd love to dedicate my life to embodying the cultural archetype of the crazy cat lady. But it's a bad idea."

"Why?"

"Because." I hesitate, and Schrödinger purrs against my fingers. My love for him knows no bounds. "I couldn't take it."

"Couldn't take what?"

"When they die."

Levi gives me a curious look. "Not for years. Decades, sometimes. And a lot happens between the beginning and the end."

"But the end *does* happen. Unavoidably. All relationships between living beings end somewhere, somehow. That's just the way it is. One party dies, or is called away by other biological needs. Emotions are transient by nature. They're temporary states brought on by neurophysiological changes that aren't meant to be long-lasting. The nervous system must revert back to homeostasis. All relationships associated with affective events are destined to end."

He seems unconvinced. "*All* relationships?"

"Yup. It's science."

He nods, but then says, "What about prairie voles?"

"What about them?"

"They pair-bond for life, don't they?"

His eyes glint appraisingly, like he's observing a fascinating biological phenomenon. We might not be talking about the misery of having to flush a goldfish down the toilet anymore. "Then prairie voles are the exception, because their oxytocin and vasopressin receptors are scattered across their reward systems."

"Isn't that biological proof that emotions and relationships *can* be long lasting?"

"Not at all. So you have two cute rodents and they stick together. Amazing. But one night husband vole crosses the highway to catch *Ratatouille* at the local theater and ends up pancaked by a Ford Mustang owned by a dipshit who's driving to cheat on his wife with an unknowing college girl. Cue: grieving widow vole. It sucks, but it's like I told you: one way or another."

"And what happens in between doesn't make it worth it?"

Have you ever been left behind? I want to ask him. *Have you ever lost it all? Do you know how it feels? Because it doesn't sound like you do.* But I don't want to be cruel. I'm not cruel. I just want to protect myself, and if Levi doesn't want to do the same . . . he's stronger than I am.

"Maybe," I say, noncommital, and watch Schrödinger gracefully steal to where Levi is standing. "So, what's the plan for tonight?"

"What do you want to do?"

I shrug. "I don't know. What do *you* want to do?"

He smiles at me mischievously. "I thought maybe we could go for a jog."

• • •

I'D EXPECTED HIM to be reserved about sex.

Not that I'd thought about it very much, but if someone had held a gun to my head and forced me to guess, I'd have probably told them, "I bet Levi Ward is quiet in bed. Boring. Because he's such a guarded person *out* of bed. A few low grunts, maybe. A handful of words, all directives. Faster.

Slower. *Actually*, this other angle is better." I'd have been wrong. Because there's nothing reserved in the way he takes his pleasure out of my body. Nothing at all.

I'm not sure how I find myself spread out on my stomach in the middle of his bed, trying to breathe steadily as he traces the line of small tattoos down my spine.

"The UK," he says, hoarse and a little shaky. "And—I don't know this one. Or the next. But Italy. Japan."

"Italy's—*ah*—a boot. Easy." I push my forehead into the pillow, biting my lower lip. This would be easier if he weren't inside me. If he hadn't pushed to the side the green panties I'd bought to celebrate BLINK—the ones that I regretted the second Levi was announced as my co-lead, the ones I didn't think I'd use anytime soon, the ones Levi stared at speechless for a whole minute—and slowly, inexorably slid in to the hilt.

"They're pretty. The outlines." He lowers himself to kiss the skin of my neck. It makes his cock shift inside me, and we both groan. It's just embarrassing, the way my back arches, the way my ass bucks back into his abdomen like my body isn't mine anymore. "You might be too tight this way. It might be too good."

Sex isn't like this. *I*'m not like this. I'm not the type to come quickly, or uncontrollably, or loudly. I'm not the type to come very often. But there's a place inside me that he hits. He found it last night, too, but now, in this position, or maybe just because it's slower . . . I don't know what it is, but it's even better.

He thrusts inside me a couple times, shallow, experimental, and I have to fist my hands into his sheets. They are shaking.

"They're—" I have to stop. Collect myself. Clear my throat. Tense. Release. "They're my homes. All the places I've lived."

"Beautiful." He presses a soft kiss to the ball of my shoulder. "So damn beautiful," he repeats, almost to himself, like it's not about my tattoos anymore. Then the mattress shifts, I hear a frustrated groan, and all of a sudden I feel cold. He's not touching me anymore. He has pulled back. Pulled out.

“What are you . . . ?” I try to turn around, but his hand splays between my shoulder blades to hold me down gently.

“Just trying to pace myself.” His voice is all strained, self-effacing amusement. I can’t see his smile, but I picture it in my head, faint, warm, beautiful. I take a deep, shuddering breath, trying to relax into the sheets, feeling his eyes roam my body. His fingers trail down my back and then he begins to arrange me ever so slightly, tilting my hips at a different angle.

Levi exhales. “All those years ago. And then later. There were lots of things that I imagined doing to you, but I always went back to . . .” He trails off. For a few seconds I hear very little, but it’s okay. I’m unwinding from the trembling, needy, overheated mess he makes of me, and it’s good to have a moment to calm down. It’ll be nice to keep some dignity in this bed —

The palms of his hands move between my legs and spread them apart. My panties are yanked all the way to the side. I gasp, feeling cold air on my core, feeling so open, exposed, it’s almost obscene. “You look . . .” His voice is quiet, and then he half explodes in a low, “Fuck.” I’m a fraction of a second from asking him what’s wrong with me when I feel him pull my hips higher.

“Levi?”

His tongue, his lips, his nose press into me from behind, and I inhale sharply. First it’s careful, delicate licks, flicking my clit and nudging my opening; then it’s deep kisses, mapping me thoroughly.

“Oh my *God*,” I moan.

His only response is a low, satisfied growl against my folds, and I don’t know if it’s the vibrations, or the enthusiastic way he’s working on me, or the fact that he’s holding me wide open like I am a feast made for him to consume, but my belly tenses, and my limbs are shaking, and keeping my pleading noises in is a losing game. It can’t last, not like this. It takes him less than a minute to push me tumbling over the edge.

This is not my body. Or maybe it is, but Levi’s in charge, and I don’t mind. The pleasure takes over, crashes over me like a tidal wave, and before

it even dries out I feel him rearranging me once more, pressing my stomach into the mattress again until I'm at his mercy.

His fingers are on me, parting me open. Then there is a stretch, a split-second burn, and he's pushing deep inside. He was there before and it was heaven, but I'm wetter now, and the friction is even more delicious. I feel myself tighten, quick, fluttering contractions around his length.

This is. So. Unbelievably. Good.

"*Jesus*," Levi grunts. Tests a deep, shaky thrust. "You're still coming, aren't you?"

Yes. No. I don't know. I twist my neck and turn back. He's looking down at me. At my flushed skin and my trembling flesh. He's not going to stop anytime soon, I know it. I'm going to come disastrously quickly, again, or maybe I'll never stop, and he's going to stare at me for every last second of it. Caging me, propped up on his huge, shaking arms, with that hungry, spellbound gleam in his eyes. "You're some kind of fantasy. Built to do this. Built for me. Fuck, Bee." His rhythm picks up. Uneven and choppy, but it picks up.

And I can't bear it.

"You can't," I moan.

He immediately pauses.

"No," I whine. "Don't stop."

"You said—?"

"Just . . . Please, don't look at me."

He seems to finally get it. "Hush." He lowers himself and presses a kiss to my cheekbones. It's getting—it's impossible, but it's getting even better. He's figured it out, the inside of me. How to angle his thrusts. They're more shallow, more purposeful, and I'm . . .

Babbling. Things like *Oh my god* and *More* and *Please* and *Please harder* and he somehow knows what I mean. He makes sense of me, and bends down to run his tongue down the skin of my throat, to bite my shoulder, to grunt his pleasure against my nape.

"I'm not sure," he murmurs gutturally, breath harsh against my ear, "how I haven't come yet."

Me neither, I think. I say his name, muffled in the pillow, and just let go.

19

BASOLATERAL AMYGDALA: ARACHNOPHOBIA

I'D LIKE TO take back everything I've said so far.

Well, not *everything*. Just the whole *I'm going to dedicate my life to the pursuit of neuroscience and forsake all bodily pleasure with the sole exception of vegan Nutella* bit I've been going on about. I'd like to take that part back: having a friend-slash-coworker-slash-whatever with benefits suits me. Deliciously, fantastically, magically so. I am unbothered. Moisturized. Happy. In my lane. Focused. Flourishing. I suspect I'm having the best weeks of my adult life—including the one spent as a Donuts & Art Camp counselor, where the extent of my duties was to stuff my face with frosting and keep an eye on ten-year-olds as they proclaimed that Cézanne's paintings were "cute, but very orange." Maybe it's the mind-altering sex. I'm sure it's the mind-altering sex. Undoubtedly it's the mind-altering sex, but there's more than that.

Take BLINK, for example: the demonstration is set for next Friday. Would I feel a tad more relaxed if I had four more weeks before Boris drags half of Congress in front of me? Of course. I'm obsessive and like to be overprepared. But every single test we ran since our breakthrough gave us excellent results. We're moving to a stage that feels less "thankless grueling groundwork" and more "groundbreaking scientific advance," and most of

the balls are in my court. Each helmet has to be customized for the astronaut who'll wear it based on the mapping of their brain. It's a lot of fine-tuning, and I love every second of it. Everyone does: seeing something we've been working on tirelessly yield results is a big morale boost, and the engineers have been arriving early and staying late, buzzing around Levi and me with constant questions, and . . .

We've been keeping it secret. This thing Levi and I are doing. Obviously. There's no point in telling the engineers. Or Rocío. Or Guy—who mostly alternates between questions about my nonexistent husband and inviting Levi out. On Wednesday it's: "Basketball tonight?" On Thursday: "Beers?" Friday: "What's going on this weekend?" I'd feel guilty at Levi's standard response ("Sorry, man, I'm swamped."), but it's only temporary. Just one of those things: girl with no interest in relationships meets dude who was into her years ago and they take up the horizontal mambo—no strings attached. In a few weeks I'll be home, and Guy will have Levi all to himself. In the meantime, we're stocking up on time together like camels. Time and sex. Have I mentioned the sex? I must be twenty hours behind on sleep, but somehow I'm not tired. My body might be evolving into a sophisticated bioweapon capable of converting orgasms into rest.

"You should just move in," Levi tells me on Friday morning. I blink bleary-eyed over coffee he poured me, my brain struggling to decipher the words.

"What do you mean?"

"Bring your stuff here." He just got home from his run and looks sweaty, disheveled, and disturbingly good. "Pack a bag. Then you won't have to go back and forth to get a change of clothes. It's not your real apartment anyway."

I study him over my mug. Maybe he's suffering from heatstroke. "I can't move in with you." I'm pretty sure there's language about that in the fuckbuddying contract.

"Why?"

"Because. What if you need to . . ." *Watch pornography?* He probably wouldn't—I'd be his live-in pornography. *Bring home other girls?* I don't

see him doing that, either. *Man cave it up?* It's a big house. *Walk around naked?* He already does it. I can't believe I'm having sex with someone with a six-pack.

"I'm serious," he continues. "I have a better bed. Better cat. Better hummingbirds."

"Lies. There are no hummingbirds in your garden."

"They show up when you're not around. You'll have to move in to see them."

"Rocío might notice."

He is quiet, waiting for me to elaborate. "And?"

"Then Kaylee would. And she might tell others. If I'd found out that Sam was screwing Dr. Mosley on the side, I'd have hollered it to the winds." I frown. "I'm a monster. Poor Sam."

"If Kaylee tells others, then she tells others. That's not a problem."

I rub my eyes. "I'm not sure I want your entire team to know that I'm having a thing with a colleague. It sounds like the type of thing . . ."

". . . for which women in STEM get unfair shit all the time?"

"Yup."

"Fair. But even if Rocío noticed, she wouldn't know that you are at my place. Plus she might have other stuff on her mind, given the number of times I've heard her and Kaylee call each other 'babe' in the last week."

"True." I bite my lower lip, actually considering moving in. Am I insane? I don't think so. I just like him—like *this*, *being* with him. Fuckbuddyship with Levi Ward suits me, and I just want . . . a little more of it. "FYI, I wear a retainer at night."

"Sexy."

"And your bathroom will be stained purple forever. Seriously. Five showers and your bathtub will be a giant eggplant emoji."

He gives me a solemn nod and pulls me closer. "It's everything I ever wanted."

• • •

IT'S SATURDAY MORNING and we're cooking together—by which I mean Levi's making pancakes and I'm standing next to him, stealing blueberries and telling him about *The Mermaid's Tale*, the Young Adult book idea I've been nursing since grad school (nothing like a nanoscopic office and perennially skirting the poverty line to stimulate a gal's imagination for escapist fiction).

"Wait." He frowns. "Ondine doesn't know she's half mermaid before joining the swim team?"

"Nope, she doesn't know she was adopted. She finds out on the first practice, when they throw her in the water and she swims one lap in . . . I'll have to research how long it takes to swim one lap, but she's as fast as . . ."

"Michael Phelps?" Levi flips a pancake.

"Sure, whoever that is. And Joe Waters, cutest senior in school, sees her and becomes her faithful sidekick in her journey of self-discovery."

"Do they end up together?"

"Nope. He goes to college, she sprouts a tail."

"Can't they do long distance?"

"No. I won't lie to impressionable youths about the durability of human relationships."

He scowls. "That's a bad ending—"

"It's not—it's mer-mazing!"

"—and long-distance relationships are not a lie."

"Happy-ending long-distance relationships sure are. Just like all other happy-ending relationships."

He pins me with a look. The corners of the pancake are darkening dangerously. "And ours will end poorly, too?"

"Nah." I wave my hand. "We'll be fine, because we're casual."

He stiffens, lips thinning. "I see." He relaxes with visible effort, and . . . there's something odd about his expression.

"What's that face?" I ask.

"What face?"

"That one. The one you put on when you're about to try to convince me that Nirvana is better than Ani DiFranco."

“I’m not going to try to convince you.”

“Ah. So you admit that I’m right.”

“You’re *not* right. You’re stubborn, and misguided, and often wrong—about music and other things. But there’s no use in trying to reason with you.” He leans closer and kisses me—lingering, soft, deep. I lose myself a little. “I’ll just have to show you.”

“Show me wh—?”

Levi’s phone rings. He takes a moment to turn off the stove before picking up. “Yes?”

The voice on the other end is almost familiar—Lily Sullivan.

“Hey. I’m with Bee.” I give him a curious look. Why would Lily know who I am? “Sure. Of course . . . I’ll ask.” He presses his phone against his shoulder, looking at me. “Any interest in spending a few hours hanging out with a six-year-old who wants to be a spider vet and has strong opinions on Pokémons?”

I’m briefly confused. Then I realize what he’s asking and my face splits into a grin. “*Lots* of interest. But, Levi?” I whisper as he puts the phone back to his ear. “Pokémon is uncountable.”

• • •

LILY SULLIVAN IS warm, personable, and sweet in a delicious Southern way that has me instantly liking her and feeling welcome in her beautiful Early American home. Penny Sullivan, though . . . I fall in love with Penny the second I lay my eyes on her.

Not true. I fall for her when she looks up from lying facedown on the living room rug and moans with wide, pleading eyes, “My kingdom. My entire kingdom for a Twinkie.”

“She’s on her fourth day of Keto,” Lily whispers. “For her epilepsy.” She gives me the doleful look of a mother who’s been feeding her kid eggs and avocados for too many meals. “I don’t think she ever asked for a Twinkie before today.”

I remember the cravings of nine-year-old Bee, who was brutally informed by her cousin Magdalena that gummy bears are made with animal bones and didn't find out about vegan alternatives for years. "Yeah, diets are funny like that."

Though Penny seems fine now that Levi's here, laughing uncontrollably when he picks her up, throws her over his shoulder, and starts making his way across the house. "Penny Lane and I will be in the backyard, if you want to join us." It's clear that they have a routine, which consists of Levi pushing a long swing that dangles from the branch of a tall tree, and Penny yelling, "More! *More!*" as Lily sits on the patio and smiles fondly at them. I take the chair next to hers, and thank her when she pours me a glass of lemonade.

"I'm so glad you came over. Penny was supposed to have a sleepover tonight, but we postponed after the seizure earlier this week. She didn't take it well."

"I'd be grumpy, too. And it's no problem at all—your home is so lovely, thank you for having me."

She smiles, covering my hand with her palm. "Thank *you* for not thinking that"—she gestures vaguely to herself, the house, Levi, and even me—"*all of this* is weird. Having this woman who's always calling the man you're dating—"

"Oh, it's not like that. We're just—" My eyes dart to the swing. Can I talk about sex within one hundred feet of a child? Is there a law against it?

"It must be uncomfortable, considering that Levi and I once . . ." She gives me an apologetic look. I want her to stop talking about this for many reasons, including the fact that while I have no right to be jealous, judging by the little pang in my stomach I . . . apparently am? A little bit? Yikes, me. "It's long over," Lily continues. "And it was just a few weeks. We met here in Houston when he came to spend the summer with Peter, before the last year of his Ph.D. Then he went back to Pittsburgh. We were supposed to try long distance, but he said he met someone else. . . ."

The pang turns into a thud. Who did Levi meet in his fifth year? Well, me. Duh. But he can't have *broken up* with someone like Lily for—

“When he told Peter that we’d split, Peter admitted that he liked me and asked me out.” She spreads her hands, as though she cannot believe her own story. “We got married two months later, and I got pregnant right after. Can you believe it?”

I smile. “It’s so romantic. I’m so sorry about what happened to Peter.”

“Yeah. It was . . . It’s not easy.” She looks away. “Thank you for what you’re doing for BLINK. I know it’s high security and you can’t talk about it, but when you came on board, Levi mentioned what an asset you’d be. It means a lot, having someone like you carry out Peter’s legacy. And thank you for sharing Levi with us.”

There’s a lump in my throat. “He’s not mine to share.”

“I think he might be, actually. Oh, that *little*— Penny, you need a hat! You can’t be in the sun like that!”

“Levi said I could!”

Levi lifts one eyebrow, clearly having said no such thing. Penny sullenly stalks to her mother, only to stop in front of me with a shy, hesitant look.

“Does that hurt?” she asks, shifting her weight from one foot to the other.

“What— Oh, my nose piercing. Just a tiny bit when I first got it, many years ago.”

She nods skeptically. “Is your name really Bee?”

“It is.”

“Like the bug?”

“Yup.”

“Why?”

Levi and I laugh. Lily covers her eyes with a hand.

“My mom was a poet, and she *really* liked a set of poems about bees.”

Penny nods. Apparently, it makes as much sense to her as it did to Maria DeLuca-Königswasser. “Where’s your mom?”

“Gone, now.”

“Oh. My daddy’s gone, too.” I can feel the tension in the adults, but there’s something matter-of-fact about the way Penny talks. “What’s your favorite animal?”

“Will you be disappointed if I don’t say bees?”

She mulls it over. “Depends. Not if it’s a good one.”

“Okay. Are cats good?”

“Yes! They’re Levi’s favorite, too. He has a black kitty!”

“That’s right,” Levi interjects. “And Bee has a kitty, too. A see-through one.”

I glare at him.

“*My* favorite animals are spiders,” Penny informs me.

“Oh, spiders are, um”—I suppress a shudder—“cool, too. My sister’s favorite animals are blobfish. Have you ever seen one?”

Her eyes widen, and she climbs on my lap to look at the picture I’m pulling up on my phone. God, I love children. I love *this* child. I look up and notice the way Levi’s staring at me with an odd light in his eyes.

“Is your sister a child?” Penny asks after making a face at the blobfish.

“She’s my twin.”

“Really? Does she look like you?”

“Yep.” I scroll to my favorites and tap on a picture of the two of us at fifteen, before I started what Reike calls my “journey of soft-core body modification.” “Wow! Which one is you?”

“On the right.”

“Do you get along?”

“Yeah. Well, we insult each other a lot, too. But yeah.”

“Do you live together?”

I shake my head. “I actually don’t see her in person much. She travels a lot.”

“Are you mad that she’s gone?”

Ah, children. And their loaded questions. “I used to be. But now I’m just a bit . . . sad. But it’s okay. She needs to travel just as much as I need to stay put.”

“My friend said that if you’re a twin, your children will be twins, too.”

“You have a higher probability, yes.”

“Do you want twins?”

“Penny,” Lily reprimands her gently, “no grilling guests on family planning before lunch.”

“Oh, that’s fine. I would *love* to have twins.” I used to dream of it, actually. Even though at this point I probably won’t. For obvious reasons. That I won’t bother Penny with.

She smiles. “That’s good, because so does Levi.”

“Oh. Oh, I—” I feel myself go crimson and look at Levi, expecting to find him just as embarrassed, but he’s staring at me with the same expression from before, only about twenty times more intense, and—

“Does anyone want sherbet?” Lily asks, clearly picking up on the weirdness.

“Mother,” Penny says darkly, “must you *torture* me?”

“I got special ice cream at the store for you.” Penny’s eyes widen and she runs inside the house. “Poor girl,” Lily mutters as we follow her inside. “Keto ice cream’s probably disgusting.”

“You underestimate how desperate she might be,” I tell her. “There are things I used to find appalling after going vegan that I started loving out of —”

“Bee! Bee! Look, I want to show you something!”

“What’s that?” I smile and crouch to her height.

“This is Shaggy, my—”

My eyes fall on the stuffed tarantula plush toy in her hands, and sound recedes. My vision fogs. I’m hot and cold at the same time, and all of a sudden, everything goes dark.

• • •

“THAT WAS SO cool! Levi, I love your girlfriend soooo much!”

“I know the feeling.”

“Goodness. Should I call 911?”

“Nah, she’s fine.” Everything’s foggy, but I think I’m in Levi’s arms. He’s patiently holding my head up, no concern in his tone. In fact, he sounds weirdly charmed. “This happens to her every other day.”

“Slander,” I mumble, fighting to open my eyes. “Lies.”

He smiles down at me and—he’s *so* handsome. I love his face. “Look who’s gracing us with her presence.”

“Is it low blood sugar?” Lily asks apprehensively. “Can I get you anything to—?”

“Bee is like me!” Penny is saying, clapping her hands excitedly. “She has the same bursts of electricity in her brain! She has seizures!”

“It’s a bit like seizures,” I say, straightening up.

“Bee has a useless parasympathetic nervous system, which is an endless source of entertainment,” Levi explains to Penny.

“Excuse me.” I scowl. “Some of us don’t have the luxury of stable blood pressure.”

“I didn’t say it wasn’t cute,” he murmurs inaudibly against my temple. The scratch of his stubble against my skin is rough. His lips, soft.

Penny seems to be a fan, too. “Does your twin faint, too?”

“Nope. She got all the best things.” Like the ability to burp the French national anthem.

“It’s so cool!”

“It’s actually a very maladaptive autonomic response.”

“Can you do it again?”

“Not really, sweetie. Not on command.”

“When do you do it, then?”

“It depends. Sometimes it’s highly stressful, surprising situations. Other times it’s just seeing things that I’m afraid of, like snakes or spiders.”

Penny’s eyes widen. “So if I show you Shaggy again—”

Levi and Lily yell, “No!” at the same time, but it’s too late. Penny whips the toy back out from behind her back, and everything goes dark again.

• • •

WE STAY WITH the Sullivans all day, and after Shaggy gets locked in an out-of-reach cupboard, we have a blast. By the time we’re ready to leave, I know more about Pokémon than I ever cared to, and Penny has tried to

make me faint again approximately twenty times by drawing spiders on every available piece of paper.

That little monster. I love her to death.

But when we say goodbye in the entrance, agreeing that we should do it again soon, it's a bit like a pianoforte crashing on my head.

"How long will you be in Houston?" Lily asks.

All I can do is burrow farther into Levi's side. "Unclear. The project was originally supposed to last around three months, but things are going very well, so . . ." I shrug. Levi's arm tightens around me. I'm fully aware that Levi and I are the Merriam-Webster definition of transitory. But I'm enjoying this so much. His company. His friends. His food. I'll be sad when this is over in a couple of weeks.

"Are your parents still going to be in town next week?" Lily asks.

Levi's arm tightens again, this time in a completely different fashion. Before it was possessive, comforting. Now it's just tense. "Yeah."

"Ugh. Sorry about that. Let me know if you need anything."

Curious, I bring it up as soon as we're alone in the truck. "Your family will be here?"

He starts the truck, looking straight ahead. I'm beginning to recognize his moods, but this one I'm not familiar with. Yet. "My parents. There's some event on the Air Force base here."

"And you're going to see them?"

"We'll probably have dinner."

"When?"

"Not sure. My father will let me know when he's free."

I nod. And then I hear a voice that sounds a lot like mine ask, "Can I come?"

He puffs out a laugh. "Are you a fan of strained silences interrupted by the occasional 'Pass the garlic salt'?"

"It can't be that bad. Otherwise you wouldn't even get together."

"You'd be surprised by the lengths my father will go to let me know the depth of his disappointment."

"What about your mom?"

He just shrugs.

"Listen—I can drop hints on how amazingly BLINK is going. I can say that you're the go-to engineer for most neuroscientists. I can print out your *Nature* publication and use it to gently dab my mouth after the first course."

"There better only be one course. And, Bee—" He shakes his head. "It's not that I don't want you to meet them, or that I'm embarrassed. It's just that it's going to be *truly* bad."

At least you have a shitty family to hold on to, I think, but I don't say it. I'm almost positive that Levi's parents are not as horrible as he says. I'm equally positive that he experiences them like that, and that's all that matters. "I don't want to be pushy, but I also really want to be there. I could come, and we could pretend that I'm your girlfriend."

He gives me a puzzled look. "There wouldn't be much to pretend."

"No—we can pretend that we're an inch from marriage. I can put on my lotus septum ring and leave my tattoos out. I'll wear my AOC top and ripped jeans. Think how much they'll hate me!"

I can see how little he wants to smile, and how little he can help it. "No one could hate you. Not even my father."

I wink at him. "Game on, then."

20

VENTRAL TEGMENTAL AREA: ROMANTIC LOVE

LEVI'S FATHER, AS it turns out, is perfectly capable of hating me. And so are Levi's mother and his eldest brother, who join us for dinner in a less-than-pleasantly-surprising plot twist.

But first things first. Before The Dinner there are days of intense prep for the upcoming BLINK demonstration. Bolts are tightened; stimulating frequencies are adjusted; Guy is prodded, poked, and shocked on his scalp. He's a trooper: the demonstration is about the helmet, but as test subject number one he'll be front and center, and it's clear that he's nervous about it. In the past couple of days he's been moody, anxious, and more tired than ever. I think he's been keeping his fears to himself to avoid disrupting morale, which makes me want to hug him. The other night I stopped by his office to check on him: he startled like a coil spring and quickly closed all his tabs. I guess even astronauts de-stress on YouPorn?

Rocío and Kaylee are getting chummier and chummier. I overhear them in the break room while heating up the stir fry I made yesterday in an attempt to impress Levi with the one dish I can cook—which resulted in the painful realization that I can cook zero dishes.

"If she's willing to say a few words about how the movement started, that would be amazing," Rocío is saying.

“She seems pretty private.”

“We could blur her face. Auto-tune her. Use a helium voice app.”

“Baby, that would undercut the seriousness of the message.”

“What about a Guy Fawkes mask?”

“I do love *V for Vendetta*—but no.”

“What are you guys talking about?” I ask, spearing a piece of carrot that manages to be at once burnt *and* undercooked. Amazing. This has to be a transferable skill set.

“You know #FairGraduateAdmissions, right?” Kaylee asks.

I drop my carrot back into the Tupperware. “Ah . . . vaguely.”

“It’s about guaranteeing inclusivity in the admission process. Student organizations are really active in the movement, but Ro and I are technically not students, so . . .” She turns her laptop. “We’re making the #FairGraduateAdmissions website! Not ready yet, but we’ll launch it soon. There will be information, resources, mentorship opportunities. And we’ll ask Marie Curie for an interview.”

I finish chewing and swallow. Even though I never put the carrot in my mouth. I must be eating my tongue. “Marie Curie?”

“Not the *real* Marie Curie! That would be *hilarious*, though!” Kaylee giggles at the misunderstanding for about half a minute. Rocío stares at her for the entire duration, heart-eyed. Ah, young love. “It’s the person who started the conversation. We want to launch the website with her interview, but she’s pretty anon.” She spreads her hands. Her nails are an iridescent baby blue.

I clear my throat. “She might agree to do it via email.”

“This is actually a great idea!” Ro and Kaylee exchange an offensively impressed look. Then Kaylee licks her thumb and wipes something from the corner of Rocío’s eye. “Hang on, baby. You have a smudge.”

I walk out of the room holding Rocío’s gaze and mouthing, “Goodbye, baby.” I cannot overstate how much I love this relationship development.

With so much at stake for Friday, everyone’s too frantic to notice that Levi has taken to bringing coffee to my workstation; to making sure that I don’t go too long without a break; to smiling faintly and asking if I’m going

to pass out whenever a bug flies into the lab; to teasing me about the little mounds of treats I leave for Félicette.

I have noticed. And I know he's just being a friend, a kind person, an awesome collaborator, but it hurts a little. Not hurt *hurt*. But those pangs? Those little twinges I experience when Levi stares at me? When we're running together and he effortlessly matches his pace to mine? When he leaves me the yellow vegan M&Ms because he knows they're my favorites? (Yes, they taste better than the red.) Well, those little twinges are starting to get a bit painful. Knifing at my general chest area.

Weird. Odd. Strange. Peculiar. I make a note in my Reminders app: *Visit primary care doc in Bethesda*. I'm overdue for a checkup.

Anywho. Work's fantastic, sex is even better, and #FairGraduateAdmissions is about to shake things up in academia, the last bastion of the medieval guild apprenticeship model. Things are going great, right?

Wrong. Let's loop back to The Dinner.

The first hint that it might possibly not go *super* well (or, as I think of it, my first Uh-Oh™) comes when I find out that Levi's family suggested having dinner at an upscale steakhouse. And when I say "suggested," I mean decided. I've no problem with people eating meat, but the complete disregard for Levi's dietary preferences seems less than fatherly.

The smell of grilled steak envelops us the second we step inside. I glance up at Levi and he says, apologetic, "I'll make you dinner afterward." Which causes a bit of a . . . tsunami inside me. Seriously. The pangs? Those are *nothing*. I'm being swept over by a ridiculous surge of affection for this vegan man whose probably annoying parents invited him to a steakhouse, and whose first concern is that *I* don't go hungry tonight. It's a warm feeling that threatens to explode inside my chest, which is why I stop him in the entrance with a hand on his gray button-down and pull him to me for a kiss.

We don't exactly kiss in public. And even in private, I'm not usually the one who initiates contact. His eyes widen, but he instantly bends to meet me halfway.

“I’ll also, um,” I murmur against his lips, “do stuff for you. Afterward.” *Whoa. Very sexy, Bee. Very smooth, you temptress.*

He flushes with heat. “You . . . will?”

I nod, suddenly shy. But we kiss, and that’s my second Uh-Oh™. Because a throat clears behind us, and I immediately know whose it is.

Oops.

Levi’s father is a shorter, slightly less handsome, slightly less built version of him. His mother is where he gets his wavy hair and green eyes from. And the third person . . . There’s another man with them, and it’s clear that Levi’s surprised. Given the resemblance, it’s also clear that he’s Levi’s brother.

Oh my God. This is Levi’s family. Levi’s *life*. I find myself incredibly curious. I want to know everything about him. Which is probably why I’m staring a little too hard and missing the introductions. Possibly, a third Uh-Oh™.

“. . . my eldest brother, Isaac. And this is Dr. Bee Königswasser.”

I smile, ready for my brightest *Nice to meet you*, but Levi’s father interrupts me. “A girlfriend, huh?”

I try not to stiffen. “Yup. Coworker, too.”

He nods indifferently and heads for the table, tossing an indifferent “I told you he probably wasn’t gay” to his wife, who follows him with a healthy dose of indifference. Isaac goes next after a brief smile to the two of us, a touch less indifferent. The kicker is, when I glance up at Levi, he seems indifferent, too. He just takes my hand and leads me to the table.

“You can leave anytime, okay?” I wonder who he’s telling that to.

Levi and I need about half a second with the menu before settling on our order (house salad, no cheese, olive oil dressing). We’re silent as his parents continue a conversation with Isaac that clearly began in the car. No one has asked Levi so much as “How are you?” and he seems . . . disturbingly fine with it. If anything, he looks elsewhere. Staring in the mid-distance, playing with the fingers of my left hand under the table, like I’m a miraculous anti-stress toy. I’m no expert in family dinners—or in families—but this is

fucked up. So when there's a moment of quiet I try to remind the Wards of our existence.

"Mr. Ward, do you—"

"Colonel," he says. "Please, call me Colonel." Then immediately turns to say something to Isaac. How's that for a fourth Uh-Oh™?

The first interaction is after the food arrives. "How's your salad, Levi?" his mother asks. He finishes chewing before saying, "Great." He manages to sound sincere, as though he's not a six four, two-hundred-pound brickhouse who needs four thousand calories a day. I study him in disbelief and realize something: He's not calm, or indifferent, or relaxed. He's *closed off*. Shuttered. Inscrutable.

"All good at work?" Isaac asks.

"Yup. Couple of new projects."

"We recently had a breakthrough on something that has the potential to be great," I say excitedly. "Something Levi's leading—"

"Any way NASA will reconsider your application for the Astronaut Corps?" the Colonel asks, ignoring me. Uh-Oh™ five. Should this have been a drinking game?

"I doubt it. Unless I cut off my feet."

"I don't like your tone, son."

"They won't reconsider." Levi's voice is mild. Unbothered.

"The Air Force has no height restrictions," Isaac says with his mouth full. "And they like people with fancy degrees."

"Yes, Levi." His mother now. "And the Air Force will only take you until you're thirty-nine. The Navy is . . ."

"Forty-two," Isaac supplies.

"Yes, forty-two. You don't have a lot of time to make the decision."

I thought Levi's parents were probably not as terrible as he made them out to be, but they're ten times worse.

"And the Army's thirty-five—how old are you, Levi?"

"Thirty-two, mom."

"Well, the Army probably wouldn't be your first choice—"

“What about the French Foreign Legion?” I ask, twirling a lock of purple hair. Forks stop clinking. Three pairs of eyes study me with distrust. Levi’s just . . . alert, as though curious at what might happen. God, what have these people *done* to him? “What are the age requirements for the French Foreign Legion?”

“Why would he want to join another country’s army?” the Colonel asks icily.

“Why would he want to join the US Army?” I quip back. I cannot believe that rotten Tim Carson spawned from a loving, perfect family, and someone who’s as perfect and loving as Levi comes from such rotten relatives. “Or the Air Force, or the Navy, or the Boy Scouts? It’s obviously not his calling. It’s not as though he works as an accountant who money-launders for a drug cartel. He’s a NASA engineer cited by thousands of people. He has a high-paying position.” I actually have no idea how much Levi makes, but I lift one eyebrow and carry on. “He’s not wasting his life in a dead-end job.”

Uh-Oh™ number six. The drinking game was *totally* a missed opportunity. It sure would make the silence more bearable as it stretches. And stretches. And stretches.

Until the Colonel breaks it. “Miss Königswasser, you are very rude—”

“She’s not,” Levi interrupts firmly. Calmly. But forcefully. “And she’s a doctor.” Levi holds his father’s gaze for a moment, and then moves on to his brother. “What about you, Isaac? How’s work been?”

I lean back in my chair, noticing the suspicious, hateful way the Colonel is looking at me. I give him a fake, bright smile and tune in to what Levi is saying.

• • •

THE SECOND WE’RE in the truck I take off my Converse, push the soles of my feet against the dashboard, and—Quasimotoes in full sight—I explode. “I cannot believe it!”

“Mm?”

“It’s *unfathomable*. We should make a damn case study out of this. *Science* would publish it. *Nature*. The *New England Journal of* damn *Medicine*. It would get me a Nobel Prize. Marie Curie. Malala Yousafzai. Bee Königswasser.”

“Sounds lovely. What’s ‘it’ again?”

“At the very least we’d get short-listed! We could take a trip to Stockholm. See the fjords. Meet up with my wayward sister.”

He turns up the AC. “I’ll take you to Stockholm whenever you like, but you’ll have to give me a topic if you want me to follow this conversation.”

“I just cannot believe how—how *well-adjusted* you are! I mean, okay, you and I have had our . . . issues when it comes to social interactions, but I’m befuddled that you haven’t turned out a titanic psychopath despite the family you came from. There has to be a miracle in there, no?”

“Ah.” He half smiles. “Do you want to get ice cream?”

“You had neither nature *nor* nurture on your side!”

“So, no ice cream?”

“*Of course* yes ice cream!”

He nods and takes a right. “There was some therapy involved.”

“How much therapy are we talking about here?”

“Couple years.”

“Did it entail a brain transplant?”

“Just lots of talking through how my inability to functionally communicate my needs stemmed from a family that never allowed me to. Same old.”

“They *still* don’t allow you! They’re trying to—to *erase* you and turn you into something else!” I am incensed. Enraged. Incensedly enraged. I want to mutate into Beezilla and pillage the extended Ward family at the next Thanksgiving. Levi better invite me.

“I’ve tried to reason with them. I’ve yelled. I’ve explained myself calmly. I’ve tried . . . a lot of things, believe me.” He sighs. “Eventually I had to accept what my therapist always said: all you can change is your own reaction to events.”

“Your therapist sounds great.”

“He was.”

“But I still want to commit patricide.”

“It’s not patricide if it’s not your own father.”

An angry scream bubbles out of me. “You should never talk to them again.”

He smiles. “That will send a strong message.”

“No, seriously. They don’t deserve you.”

“They’re not . . . good. For sure. I’ve considered the possibility of cutting them off many times, but my brothers and my mom are much better when my father isn’t around. And anyway . . .” He hesitates. “Today wasn’t that bad. It might have been the best dinner I’ve had with them in a long time. Which I’ll chalk up to you telling my father to can it and shocking him into temporary speechlessness.”

If that dinner was “not bad,” then I’m a K-pop idol. I gaze at the dusky Houston lights, thinking that the way his family treats him should diminish him in my eyes, realizing the truth is just the opposite. There’s something patient about the way he quietly stands up for himself. About the way he *sees* others.

Another pang near my heart. I don’t know what they’re about. I just really . . . “Levi?”

“Mm?”

“I want to tell you something.”

“I told you: your lungs are not shrinking because you’re training for a 5K—”

“My lungs are *totally* shrinking, but that’s not it.”

“What, then?”

I take a deep breath, still staring out the window. “I really, really, *really* like you.”

He doesn’t reply for a long moment. Then: “I’m pretty sure I like you more.”

“I doubt it. I just want you to know, not everyone is like your family. You can be . . . you can be *you* with me. You can talk, say, do however you

want. And I'll never hurt you like they did." I make myself smile at him. It's easy now. "I promise I don't bite."

He reaches over to take my hand, his skin warm and rough against mine. He smiles back. Just a little.

"You could rip me to shreds, Bee."

We are silent for the rest of the drive.

• • •

SCHRÖDINGER BURROWED INTO my backpack, tore a package of kale chips, decided they were not to his liking, and went for a nap with his head pillowed on the half-empty bag. I burst into laughter and forbid Levi to wake him up before I can take a million pictures to send Reike. It's the best thing to happen all day—a reminder that while Levi's actual family might suck balls, his chosen one is the best.

"I'm very impressed," I coo to Schrödinger while petting his fur.

"Don't cuddle him, or he'll feel rewarded," Levi warns me.

"Are you feeling rewarded, kitty?"

Schrödinger purrs. Levi sighs.

"Whatever Bee's doing, do not experience it as cuddles. Those are punishment pets," he says in what he probably means as a firm tone but is instead adorably helpless, and I get another pang, to my heart *and* my ovaries. I do hope he'll have kids. He'd be an amazing dad.

"Those chips were on my desk for days and Félicette never managed to open them."

"And that's not at all because Félicette doesn't exist," Levi yells from the kitchen.

"You should teach Félicette your ways," I whisper to Schrödinger, and then join Levi in the kitchen just in time to see him throw away what's left of my unjustifiably overpriced Whole Foods chips.

"Are you still hungry? Should I make you food?"

I shake my head.

"You sure? I don't mind making—"

He falls silent as I fall to my knees. His eyes widen as my smile does.

"Bee," he says. Though he doesn't quite *say* it. He mouths it breathlessly, like he often does when I touch him. And now my fingers are on his belt, which qualifies as touching. Right? "Bee," he repeats, a little guttural this time.

"I said I'd do stuff," I tell him with a smile. The clink of his belt buckle bounces off the kitchen appliances. His fingers weave into my hair.

"I figured you meant . . . watching sports with me. Or another of your burnt—*ah*—stir-fries."

I take him out of his boxers and wrap my small hand around him. He's completely hard already. Huge. Shockingly warm against my flesh. He smells like soap and himself, and I want to bottle his delicious scent and bring it with me always. "I'm not very good at stir-fries." My breath is on his skin, making his cock twitch. "This, I hope I can do well."

I'm not exactly confident, and maybe I'm a little clumsy, too, but when I softly lick the head there is a quiet, surprised groan coming from above me, and I think that maybe I'll be fine. I close my lips around him, feel Levi's hands tighten on my scalp, and my insecurities melt.

I don't know why we haven't done this before. It has to do, perhaps, with how impatient he usually is, impatient to be in me, on me, with me. There is often an undercurrent of haste with us, like we both want, need, deserve to be as close as physically possible, as quickly as physically possible, and . . . It doesn't leave much time for delays, I guess.

Levi wants it, though. It might not be something he'd ever ask for, but I can see the shape of pleasure on his face, hear his intakes of breath. I suckle right beneath the head and he lets out a sound of shocked, overwhelming pleasure. Then he threads his fingers through my hair and starts guiding me. He's too thick for me to do much, but I try to relax, to let myself enjoy this, lose myself to the taste, the fullness, his soft, deep groans as he tells me how good it feels, how much he loves my mouth, how much he loves *this*, how much he loves . . .

"Fuck." Softly, with his thumb, he traces the bulge of his cock through the skin of my cheek. My lips, stretched obscenely around him. "You really

are everything I've ever wanted," he mutters, gentle, reverent, hoarse, and then he's angling me again, this time a rhythm that's deeper, purposeful, working my jaw for his pleasure. When he holds me close and says, "I'm going to come in your mouth," like it's inevitable, like we both need this too badly to stop, I whimper around his flesh from how much I want this for him.

He loses control a little when he comes, his grunts deep and unusually rough, his grip viselike, and I feel his orgasm course through me as if it were my own. I suck him gently through the end of it, and when I look up at him I'm wet and swollen and I feel empty, trembling, a messy lump on the floor.

"Open your mouth," he rasps.

I blink at him, confused. He cups my cheek.

"I want you to open your mouth and show me."

I comply, and the sound he makes, possessive and hungry and pleased at last, travels through me like a wave. He massages the back of my neck while I swallow, his thumb caresses my jaw, and when I smile up at him, he stares at me like I've just gifted him with something divine.

It's a long night, this one. Somehow different from all the others. Levi takes his time undressing me, stopping often, lingering, losing track of his progress as if distracted by my flesh, my curves, the sounds I make. I moan, I squirm, I beg, and he still won't slide inside, too busy tracing the swell of my breast, pressing his tongue against the bump of my clit, nuzzling against the skin of my throat. I teeter on the edge for too long, and so does Levi, immobile within me, then thick and delicious and slow, slow inside and then slow out, long, drugging kisses stretching the pleasure between us, making my body twitch for his own. And then he looks down at me, hands twined with my hands, eyes twined with my eyes, breath twined with my breath.

"Bee," he says. Just my name, half gasp, all heated plea. He stares down at me as though I own him. As though his future hangs from my hands. As though everything he's ever wanted, I hold it within me. It makes my chest hurt and leap with a dangerous, thunderous kind of joy.

I close my eyes not to see and let the liquid heat swell inside me like the tide, high and low all night long.

21

RIGHT INFERIOR FRONTAL GYRUS: SUPERSTITION

THEY SAY DISASTERS come in threes, but it's not true. It's just a quirk of the human mind, always on the lookout for patterns in random statistical observations to make sense of chaos.

For instance, say you're Dr. Marie Skłodowska-Curie, circa 1911. Your health has been declining after decades spent frolicking in kiddie pools of polonium. Everything's painful and you can barely see, walk, sleep, frolic in more polonium. Sucks, right?

Well, things could suck more. You decide to do that thing you've been putting off: applying for membership at the French Academy of Sciences. You have two Nobel Prizes, so you should be a shoo-in, yes? *Non*. The Academy rejects you, and instead admits this Édouard Branly guy, who I'm sure has many great qualities—such as a penis. (If you're wondering "Who's Édouard? Never heard of this guy!" that's *exactly* my point. Excellent job, FA of S! Take your seat on the Loser Side of History, next to the University of Krakow.)

Our tally is two major bummers, and you're probably thinking: the shit-cake has been frosted. No other catastrophe will happen for a while. But you forgot the cherry on top: someone breaks into your young stud muffin's

apartment, steals your love letters, and sells them to the Fox News equivalent of early nineteenth-century France. Jean Hannity has a field day.

Imagine being Dr. Curie. Imagine sitting in your minuscule Paris apartment, trying to eat a Camembert baguette while the mob rages outside your window because you dared (gasp!) to be an *immigrant*! To be a *woman in STEM*! To *fuck*! Wouldn't you tell yourself that there's a reason this cluster of shit came about? Saturn ascending to the house of Sagittarius. Not enough lambs sacrificed to the Spaghetti Monster. Bad things come in threes. We're only humans. We're full of "whys," drowning in "whys." Every once in a while, we need a bit of "because," and if it's not readily available, we make it up.

Long story long: despite popular belief, a saying is just a saying, and disasters do *not* come in threes.

Except when they do.

The first is on Thursday night, right after the successful dress rehearsal for Friday's presentation. I'm almost looking forward to seeing Trevor tomorrow—well, not *him*, but his face when he realizes what my simpering womanly brain has accomplished. I distractedly exchange a high five with Lamar while checking my phone, and I'm so shocked by my Twitter notifications that I forget my hand in midair.

They're blowing up. In a bad way. As they often do. Except that this time the chaotic mess of insults isn't coming from the incels, or the stemlords, or the men's rights activists—but from other women in STEM.

"You gonna leave it there?" Lamar asks, pointing at my arm. I smile weakly and walk away.

> @SabineMarch I cannot believe how you have betrayed us.
>
> @AstroLena I hope STC presses charges, you bitch. #WhatWouldMarieDoIsOverParty

@Sarah_08980 Hundreds of women in STEM have been working tirelessly for #FairGraduateAdmissions, and all along you have been pretending to be an ally while only looking out for your gain. Shame.

The last tweet is from someone I've chatted with as recently as yesterday. We talked about the events she was organizing, she asked me for advice, told me she loved my account. I blink at my screen and begin scouring for the source of whatever the hell this is.

I find it soon enough. On the account of one Benjamin Green—a name that's familiar but not easy to place until I read the Twitter bio. VP at STC. I frown, and then I see the tweet.

It's a screenshot. Many screenshots. Of a conversation that happened in a private Twitter chat between Mr. Green and someone else. Someone whose icon looks a lot like Marie Curie wearing sunglasses. I read the name: @WhatWouldMarieDo. Me.

Impossible. I've never chatted with this guy. I rapidly scan the handle again, one, two, three times, looking for typos or missing letters that would signal an imposter. There are none. I frown and start reading the conversation. The time stamp is from last night.

@WHATWOULDMARIEDO Hi, Jonathan. I'm aware this is a bit unorthodox, but I hope that what I have to say will be beneficial to the both of us. I know STC has been struggling with the negative publicity #FairGraduateAdmissions has brought upon you, and that you are concerned about the movement gaining even further momentum. As you know, I'm one of its most prominent activists, and played a significant role in its inception. You probably see me as an enemy, but it doesn't have to be like that.

@WHATWOULDMARIEDO I'd like to offer you a deal. I'm open to help shift the narrative toward STC, and to tell my followers and collaborators that the demands of #FairGraduateAdmissions are excessive. That while there might be a need for reform, we do need standardized testing, and therefore it would be in our best interest to work with companies that already exist to improve on instruments that are already widely utilized. Of course, I would not be doing this for free. My real name is [redacted], in case you need to look up my credentials. I am open to hearing your offers.

I blink at my screen, floored. Then I scroll up to read the public comment Green made on top of the screenshots.

@JgreenSTC #FairGraduateAdmissions activists and the universities and institutions who take them seriously should read what @WhatWouldMarieDo, one of their leaders, asked of me. This is the real agenda of this movement: extortion.

@JgreenSTC At STC we've decided not to make this individual's identity public (for now.) We're consulting with our lawyers and keeping our options open. In the meantime, time to reconsider where you stand #FairGraduateAdmissions.

I feel light-headed. Because I haven't been breathing. I force myself to inhale some air, in and out and in again. This has to be photoshopped. Yes. There's no other explanation. Very well done, but . . . in grad school Annie photoshopped a tentacle coming out of her butt. Anything's possible, right?

I sit at my desk, noticing that lots of people I've talked with recently have blocked me—do they believe this rubbish? They can't possibly. They *know* me. Right?

MARIE: Shmac, I just saw the STC shitshow. Have you?

I bounce my foot and wait for his answer. Minutes later Rocío comes in and starts sliding stuff into her backpack. When I say "sliding," what I mean is "aggressively throwing as though she's practicing her pitch for an upcoming stoning."

"You okay?" I ask, regretting it even before the words are out. I'm probably too anxious to help her with whatever she's going to tell me.

"No."

Shit. "Is Kaylee okay?"

"No. She feels like *crap*." She zips up her backpack, forcefully sliding her arm through one of the straps. "All the work we've been doing for #FairGraduateAdmissions, flushed down the toilet because one of the leaders outed herself as a damn crook."

I freeze. Of all the conversations, I cannot imagine one more uncomfortable, untimely, unpleasant—lots of *Un*s.

"I—I saw," I stammer. My mouth is dry. "But . . . is that even true? It's probably something made up—"

"I bet it's not. People kept saying that STC's screenshots were fake, so he gave proof to some #FairGraduateAdmissions leaders. Marie really did slide into this guy's DMs and asked for money. She fucked us over—she was the one who started #FairGraduateAdmissions, so we won't be taken seriously any longer. That means lots of horrible things for lots of good people—and even for some evil ones. Like me. I'll have to spend thousands of dollars I don't have to retake a test that's less valid a predictor of my ability to succeed in grad school than the number of mummified scorpions I own. Which is seven, by the way." Her voice breaks a little on the last word, which in turn breaks my heart. She looks away, but not before I can see the lone tear sliding down her face. "I won't get into Johns Hopkins. I'll

be a jobless failure while Kaylee goes to grad school and forgets all about me."

I stand. "No. No, it won't happen—"

"I'm just so disappointed." She takes a deep breath, shuddering and despondent. "You can't trust anyone. The world really is a vampire." She shrugs, backpack bouncing on her slim shoulder. "You should stop doing that, by the way."

"What?" I follow her gaze. She's staring at my hand, where I'm furiously twisting my grandmother's ring.

"Yesterday I spent fifteen minutes arguing with Guy about whether you're married. That's what happens when you wear other people's wedding rings, Bee."

Shit. Shit, shit, *shit*. Did Guy find out? He did seem a little distant today, but I thought he was just nervous about tomorrow's demonstration. Should I go find him to explain?

"You going home?" Rocío asks.

"No, I . . ." I was supposed to leave with Levi, as usual. But I don't think I can pretend nothing happened, and telling him about this mess seems . . . well, I could, I guess. If there's someone I could trust with WWMD, it's Levi. But my shitty mood as I try to wrangle my online identity is probably more than he's bargained for. "Yeah, sure. I'll walk with you."

I shoot Levi a quick text about the change of plans and fall in step with Rocío. He doesn't answer until I'm home, asking me if everything's okay, if I want him to pick me up, if he should stop by. A few seconds later, Shmac finally replies:

SHMAC: Yeah. I saw.

MARIE: I have no idea what's happening. I never messaged Green, of course.

SHMAC: Problem is, people on #FairGraduateAdmissions side say they have proof it was you.

MARIE: Please, tell me you don't believe them.

SHMAC: I don't.

I close my eyes. *Thank God.*

SHMAC: Let me think about this, okay? Talk to some people. There must be a way to fix this. Also, check your logs. In case you've been hacked.

I have not. There's nothing out of place—every access to my account has been from Houston. I'm jittery, nervous, scared. I pace around my apartment, long and aggressively enough that it's probably a workout. I should log it into the stupid exercise app Levi made me download ("You'll keep track of your progress. It'll be rewarding." "You know what else is rewarding?" "Don't say 'Not working out,' Bee." ". . . Fine."). I'm actually considering going for a run to clear my head (Have I been body-snatched? By aliens?) when I get an email notification.

It's from a fancy legal firm, one that probably has eight names on the wall and toilet seats covered in gold leaf. The message is innocent enough, but there's a PDF attached to it. I start skimming the content, and that's when my stomach and the world around me turn.

Dr. Königswasser,

This letter is served as notice of your recent acts of unwarranted harassment. You are required to cease and desist all acts of harassment including but not limited to:

- Producing tweets under the alias "@WhatWouldMarieDo"
- Posting public content aimed at damaging the image of STC and its products

- Attempting to extort financial or other benefits from STC in exchange for unsolicited PR (or other) services

Sincerely,

J. F. Timberworth, Attorney-at-Law, on behalf of STC

22

ANTERIOR CINGULATE CORTEX: OH, SHIT

I'M NOT SURE how I spend the night after reading the letter. It's all a blur. The hours go by, and I cry. I breathe. I try to figure out what this mess is. I feel angry, shocked, beaten, lonely, sad.

Levi calls me, twice, but I remember Rocío's lone tear glistening down her cheek and feel too dirty and tainted to make myself pick up. What would Levi say if he knew? Would he believe me? How could he, if STC has my real name? I'm not sure I'd believe myself anymore.

The following day it takes all of my compartmentalizing skills to focus on work—and they're not very many. Pushing things out of my mind is not one of my talents, but I give a moderately good performance. Levi calls again in the morning, and again I don't answer, but I text him that I've been swamped with BLINK (terrible excuse, since we work together) and that I'm busy picking up Trevor at the airport (not an excuse, but equally terrible).

"Kramer couldn't come—something about a WHO symposium—but he's *very* happy," Trevor says instead of *Hi* or *How are you?* or other things normal, decent people start a conversation with. "And you know what happens when Kramer's happy?"

He gives me a lab far away from you. At least down the hallway, possibly on a different floor, ideally in another building. If I even have a future in academia. If I don't get outed as a grossly hypocritical racketeer.
"Nope."

"He funnels funds to our lab, that's what. When will the suits be ready?"

I roll my eyes, driving out of Arrivals. "They're helmets. And theoretically the prototype is ready. Some adjustments will have to be made for each individual astronaut."

"Right, you mentioned as much in one of the reports." I talk about this in *all* the reports, but reading comprehension was never Trevor's forte. "The Ward guy, the one who's leading on NASA's side? Must be a damn genius for getting this done so quickly."

I exhale slowly. I'm having a shitty enough day that I probably shouldn't complicate it by telling my boss that he's a urinal cake. Then again, *because* I'm having such a shitty day, I might not be able to help myself from telling him that he's a urinal cake. What a quandary. "Dr. Ward and I are co-leads," I say, my tone harsher than it's ever been with Trevor. He must realize, because he gives me an irritated glance.

"Yeah, but—"

"But?"

He looks out the window, chastised. "Nothing."

Better be.

Trevor the Urinal Cake is the smallest of the big shots in attendance. There are two Texas congressmen, at least three of Boris's bosses, and lots of Space Center employees who aren't directly involved in BLINK. I'm introduced to everyone, but don't retain anyone's name. There's a lot of *Impressive*, and *Can't wait to see the helmets in action*, and *This is history in the making* being thrown around, which makes me nervous and apprehensive, but I tell myself that it'll be fine. Right now, my job is the one thing I have under control—thank Dr. Curie for that.

The goal of the demonstration is to show that the helmet improves Guy's attention during a flight simulation. Guests will observe on a large screen from the conference room next door while Levi, the core engineering team,

and I will be in the control room to make sure everything proceeds smoothly. I toy with the idea of taking five minutes alone with Guy to come clean about the marriage thing, but the throng and chaos make it impossible.

I'm double-checking my protocols when Levi comes in, making a beeline to me. "Hey." His eyes are serious. Dark green. Beautiful, like the underbrush of a forest. He drags a chair next to mine, the distance between us blurring the line between colleagues and something more. I should pull back, but no one's looking at us, and the sight of him overwhelms me anyway: it's like all those mysterious pangs elevated to the tenth. I realize that last night was the first we spent apart since . . . since whatever *us* is happened, and that being with him again feels like . . .

No. It does *not* feel like home. Home is something else. Home is the new lab this gig is going to get me. Home is the publications I'll write about today. Home is the community of women in STEM I made for myself that I'll somehow have to fight for. *That's* home, not Levi.

"Hey," I say, averting my eyes.

"You okay?"

"Nervous. You?"

"Fine." He doesn't seem fine. I must be communicating it because he adds, "There's a mess. Not work related—I'll explain later."

I nod, and for a wild, reckless second, I have the weird impulse of telling him about *my* mess. I should, shouldn't I? My name will get out sooner or later. If I tell him now, he'll . . .

Believe that Marie—and therefore me—is a crook. Like everyone else except for Shmac. No, I can't tell him. He wouldn't care anyway.

"I have something for you," he says, the corner of his lip curving in a small smile. The back of his hand brushes mine, and my heart squeezes. It likely seems accidental from the outside. It feels anything but.

"Yeah?"

"I'll show it to you later. It has to do with your imaginary cat."

I smile weakly. "I can't wait for Félicette to puke on your keyboard."

He shrugs. “Imaginary vomit’s my favorite kind.” He presses his knee against mine and stands, stopping midway to whisper against the shell of my ear, “I missed you last night.”

I shiver. He’s gone before I can answer.

• • •

“—LONELINESS IS KILLING me, and I must confess, I still believe.”

Once again, everyone in the control room laughs at Guy’s bellowing. The situation in the conference room is probably the same.

“That was lovely. Thank you, Britney,” Levi murmurs through the mic, amused. We exchange a brief look. My heart’s aflutter. I feel like I’m about to go onstage for a school play I’ve been practicing the whole year. But I’m an adult, and what’s at stake is my professional hopes and dreams. *Which,* I remind myself, *are the only sort of hopes and dreams I allow.* “Ready to start?”

“I was born ready, baby.” Guy lifts one eyebrow under the visor of the helmet. “Well. After a labor that my mother often refers to as the most harrowing forty-three hours of her life.”

“Poor lady.” Levi shakes his head, smiling. “You know the drill, but this is what’s going to happen. We’re going to start an attention task on the screen.”

“I’m being paid to play video games. Excellent.”

“Then we’ll activate the helmet when we’re ready and measure your performance under both conditions, for reaction time and accuracy.”

“Got it.”

“Starting in a few seconds, then.” Levi turns off the mic. He and I exchange another glance, this time lingering.

This is it.

We did it.

You and I.

Together.

Then Levi turns around and nods at Lamar to start the routine. There isn't much I have to do since the protocols have been programmed and are loaded to go. I lean back, eyes on the monitor, fixed on Guy's sitting form.

I'll need to buy him a present, I think. *A bottle of something expensive. Britney concert tickets. For being so patient when I kept shooting theta bursts at his brain. For being so nice. For lying to him.* Then the task loads, and I'm too busy observing to think much of anything.

It starts like usual. Guy's job is to detect stimuli as they appear on the screen. He's an astronaut, and at baseline he performs about ten million times better than I, a regular everyday wimp, ever could. A few minutes later Levi gives another signal, and the brain stimulation protocol I wrote is activated.

Ten seconds pass. Twenty. Thirty. I eye the estimates for the performance metrics—nothing happens. Accuracy and reaction times are hovering around the same values as before.

Shit. What's going on? I squirm nervously in my seat. The lag between the inception of the stimulation and the improvement in performance is usually over by now. I glance at Levi with a worried expression, but he's calm, sitting back in his chair with his arms folded on his chest, alternating looks between Guy and the values. The only sign of impatience is his fingers, drumming on his bicep. He does that when he's focused. *Levi. My Levi.*

I'm stimulating Guy's dorsal premotor cortex—why the hell is he *not* improving—?

Suddenly, the numbers start to change. Accuracy skyrockets from 83 percent to 94. Median reaction times decrease by tens of milliseconds. The new values oscillate, and then keep steady. I swear the entire room sighs in relief in unison.

"Sweet," someone murmurs.

"Sweet?" Lamar asks. "That's *epic*."

I turn to grin at Levi and find him already staring at me with a happy, undecipherable expression. *This*, at least, is going great. The rest of my

life's a shitshow, but *this* is working. We made something good, and useful, and just plain badass.

I told you, didn't I? What's reliable, and trustworthy, and never, *ever* abandoned Dr. Curie? Science. Science is where it's at.

Until it's not.

I'm the first to realize something's wrong. Most of the engineers are talking among one another, and Levi's eyes are still clinging to me with that curious, earnest expression. But both the values and the monitors are in my line of sight, so I notice the numbers changing to values we've never before seen. And the twitchy way Guy's elbow is jerking.

"What's—" I point at it. Levi immediately turns. "Is he okay?"

"The arm?" Levi's brows knit. "I've never seen anything like that."

"It's similar to what would happen if we stimulated his motor cortex, but we definitely aren't— *Whoa*." The twitches get significantly larger. Guy's entire body starts shaking.

Levi turns on the mic. "Guy. Everything okay in there?"

No answer.

"Guy? Can you hear me?"

Silence. And Levi's deepening frown.

"Guy, do you—"

Guy falls out of his chair with a loud thud, his body at once rigid and slack. The control room bursts into chaos—everyone stands, half a dozen chairs scraping against the floor.

"Stop the protocol!" Levi yells, and a second later he's out of the room and into the lab. I see him appear on the monitor and kneel next to Guy's spasming body, taking him into his arms. He turns him to the side and clears the floor of nearby objects.

A seizure. Guy's having a seizure.

Other people barge into the room—NASA physicians, engineers—and ask Levi questions about the stimulation protocol. He answers as best as he can, still holding Guy in his arms as the doctors work around them.

It's because of Penny. Levi knows what to do because of Penny.

There's mayhem everywhere. People running in the hallways, in and out of the control room, screaming, swearing, asking questions without replies. Some are directed at me, but I cannot answer, cannot do anything but stare at Guy's face, at the way Levi is cradling him. I collapse back in my chair. After a minute or an hour, my eyes drift away.

The helmet is on the floor, rolled to the farthest corner of the room.

• • •

"—IS KOWALSKY?"

"He was driven to the hospital."

"—going to be okay?"

"Yeah, he regained consciousness. It's just a checkup, but—"

"—they gave him a fucking seizure, what is—"

"What a disaster—"

"—the end of BLINK, for sure. God, the *incompetence*."

I'm a fortress. I'm impenetrable. I'm not even here. I don't look at anyone. I try my best not to listen as I walk to Boris's office after he hissed at me to be there *stat*. It was four and a half minutes ago. I should hurry.

I knock when I arrive, but enter before being invited to come in. Levi's already inside, staring at the pretty green of the Space Center outside the square window. I ignore him. Even when I feel his eyes on me, the prickle of a glance asking for a response, I ignore him.

I wonder what he's thinking. Then I don't wonder anymore: it probably cannot be borne anyway.

"Where was the error?" Boris asks from behind the desk. He always looks tired and disheveled, but if he told me he was just run over by a truck, I'd believe him. I can't begin to comprehend the repercussions of today's events. For him. For NASA. For Levi.

"Yet unclear," Levi says, holding his eyes. "We're looking into it."

"Was there a hardware malfunction?"

"We're ascertaining whether—"

"Bullshit."

A brief silence. “As soon as we know, you’ll know.”

“Levi, you see me as a paper pusher—you’re probably right, I have become one. But let me remind you that I *do* have a degree in engineering, plus a couple of decades of experience on you, and while I’m by no means the creative genius you are, I’m well aware that it won’t take you three weeks of system analyses to figure out whether there was a malfunction on the hardware side or—”

“There wasn’t,” I interrupt. They both turn to me, but I only look at Boris. “At least, I doubt it. I haven’t run any analytics, but I’m sure the error was in the stimulation protocol.” I swallow. “On my side.”

He nods, tight-lipped. “What happened?”

“I don’t know. My guess is that the stimulation was too intense or too high-frequency, and either displaced or too diffuse. This caused widespread neuronal misfiring—”

“Okay.” He nods again. “*How* did it happen?”

“That I don’t know. We spent weeks mapping Guy’s brain, and nothing like that ever happened. The protocol was tailored to him.” I bend my head, staring down at my hands. I’m wringing my nonna’s ring. As usual. “It won’t happen again. I’m sorry.”

“No, it won’t.” He runs a hand down his face. “BLINK’s over.”

There’s a sharp intake of breath—Levi’s. I look up. “What?”

“This is not a mistake I can tolerate. You took someone who went through years of astronaut training and had him in a puddle on the floor. Guy’s fine, but what if the next astronaut isn’t?”

I shake my head. “There won’t be a next astronaut—”

“There should have been *no astronauts*. Especially not in front of half of NASA!”

“Boris.” Levi is standing behind me. Probably a little too close. “We tested this protocol over ten times. Nothing similar ever happened. *You* rushed the demonstration when we could have waited weeks—”

“And *you* vouched for Bee when NIH sent her here, and she gave a seizure to *one of my astronauts*!” Boris clenches his jaw, trying to calm down. “Levi, I don’t blame you—”

A loud knock. The door opens, and things get even worse.

No. Not *Trevor*, please. Not when I'm at my lowest.

And yet, Boris gestures for him to come in. "We were just discussing . . ."

"I heard." He shrugs darkly. "You weren't exactly quiet. So," he says, clapping his hands, "I smoothed things over with the congressmen. Told them BLINK's still salvageable."

"Wait." Boris frowns. I might throw up. "I understand there are many interests at play here, but not so fast. Clearly something went very wrong, and—"

"Someone," Trevor interrupts. The look he gives me is full of contempt. "I heard what you were saying. Clearly the problems were with one specific person, and they can be solved by eliminating the weak link and putting another NIH researcher on the project. Josh Martin and Hank Malik applied for the position, too."

"Are you an idiot?" Levi takes a step toward Trevor, looming over him. "You have no knowledge of your own scientists if you think Dr. Königswasser is a weak link—"

"Excuse me," I say. My voice is shaking. I can't cry, not now. "I don't think I'm needed for this conversation. I'll check on Guy and . . ." *Clear out my things.*

Yeah.

I get out as fast as I can. I'm not ten steps from the door when I hear feet running behind, then around me. Levi stops in front of me, a near-desperate expression in his eyes. "Bee, we can still fix this. Come back in there and —"

"I—I need to go." I try to keep my tone firm. "But you need to stay in there and make sure that BLINK actually happens."

He gives me a disbelieving look. "Not without you. Bee, we have no idea what really went wrong. Boris is overreacting and Trevor's a fucking idiot. I'm not going to—"

"Levi." I let myself reach for his wrist. Close my hand around it and squeeze. "I'm asking you to go back in there and do what you have to do to

make sure BLINK happens. *Please*. Do it for Peter. For Penny. And for me." It's a low blow. I can see it in his narrowing eyes, in the set of his jaw. But when I start walking again, he doesn't follow.

And right now, that's all I want.

23

AMYGDALA, AGAIN: FEAR

REIKE WON'T ANSWER my calls, because she's finally traveling to Norway. It might be for the best: I'd just cry at her about neuronal depolarization and electromagnetic induction, which can't be healthy for me, or edifying for her. I want to visit Guy in the hospital to . . . bring him an Edible Arrangement? Offer my firstborn in penance? Self-flagellate at the foot of his bed? I'm not even sure where they brought him, if he's still there, and I doubt he wants to see me. Maybe I should text him. *Do you hate me for giving you a seizure through my carelessness and sheer incompetence? Yes, No, Maybe, pls circle.*

It's probably a good thing that I'm alone with my thoughts. Paradoxically, it allows me not to think too much. Things, bad things, are going to happen soon. My connection with WWMD will be disclosed, a community I spent years building will turn against me, and I have no illusion that Trevor will renew my contract. It's staggering, but if I don't talk about it I can pretend it's not happening.

I eat a banana—first thing I've had in twenty-four hours—and go to my room. I pull my suitcase from under my bed, dust it off, and start folding my clothes. Jeans. Jeans. A skirt I haven't gotten a chance to wear yet. My favorite teal top. A rain poncho. Jeans.

The suitcase is almost full when my doorbell rings. I sigh and force myself to go to the door, but I suspect I already know who it is. Turns out, I'm right.

"Hey." Levi looks tired. And like he's been running a hand through his hair. And very, very beautiful. My heart knots. "You're not answering your phone. I was worried."

"Sorry, I forgot to check it. Is everything okay?"

He gives me a slightly incredulous look that I take to mean *No, absolutely nothing is okay* and follows me into the living room. Through the balcony doors, my eyes catch the hummingbird feeder. I should take it down. Pack it. But the hummingbirds . . . Maybe I could ask Rocío to hang it for me. Wouldn't want the little guy who's been coming around to find himself without dinner.

"—from Guy," Levi's saying.

I whirl around. "How is he?"

"Fine—discharged. He asked me to tell you not to freak out, and that he probably deserved it. And to thank you for the trip of a lifetime." Levi rolls his eyes, but I can see the relief in him.

"Can I— Did he say if I can go see him?"

"He's resting, but we can go tomorrow. He'd love to see you." His tone hardens ever so slightly. "Bee, he knows it's not your fault. A million things could have gone wrong, and none are exclusively your responsibility. Boris rushed the demonstration—"

"Because *I* let him rush it." I press my fingers into my eyes. "I told him I could make it. And this mess would have happened anyway, just not publicly. I must have done something wrong. I must have forgotten to account for something—I don't know. I don't *know*. I've been thinking about it and I cannot figure out what the fuck I did wrong, which means that someone else, someone who has a clue what they're doing, should be on this project with you."

He blinks. "What do you mean?"

"What I just said, I guess." I shrug. "I hope they send Hank. Josh is a prick. And you have to help me ensure that Rocío stays on—she deserves

this. And could you write her a rec letter for grad school? I don't know if mine will—"

"No." He steps forward and reaches out. His hand comes up to the back of my head, spanning from my nape to the curve of my throat. It feels so . . . normal. Familiar. *He* is so familiar. "Bee, no one's going to replace you. BLINK is as much yours as it's mine. If it weren't for you, we'd still be stuck."

"You don't understand." I take a step back. His touch lingers until I'm out of reach—until he has to let go. "I'm out. Like Trevor said."

"Trevor will change his fucking mind."

"He won't. He *shouldn't*. Levi, today I endangered someone's safety. I jeopardized the existence of a project that's *your best friend's legacy*." I press my fingers to my lips. They're trembling. All of me is trembling. "How can you even want me to stay?"

"Because I trust you. Because I *know* you. I know the person you are, the scientist you are, and—" His eyes fall on my bedroom. On my almost-but-not-quite-packed suitcase, open on the floor. He stiffens, pointing at it. "What's that?"

I swallow. "I told you. I can't in all conscience stay on BLINK anymore."

He stares at me, open-mouthed, disbelieving. "So you're packing up and leaving?" The question is aggressive, in a way that makes me think that there are right and wrong answers. I struggle to imagine any besides the one.

"What else should I do?" I shrug helplessly. "What's the point of me being here?"

In the past two months, I've seen a lot of Levi Ward. I've seen him happy, focused, upset, sad, exultant, angry, horny, honest, disappointed, and various combinations of all these things. The way he's looking at me right now, though . . . that's something else. Beyond all of it.

Levi comes closer and opens his mouth, meaning to say something, then immediately turns around and paces away, shaking his head furiously. He

takes a deep breath, and another, but when he looks at me again he's hardly calmer.

"Are you serious?" Icy. His voice, his eyes, the line of his jaw. Pure ice.

"I . . . Levi. My presence here was always contingent upon my role in BLINK."

"*Was*. But things have changed."

"What has changed?"

"I don't know. Maybe the fact that we've been together every second of the past two weeks, that we've made love every single night, that I know that you sigh in your sleep, that you floss like a maniac, that you taste like honey *everywhere*."

I feel my cheeks heat. "What does that even mean?"

"Are you serious?" he repeats. "All of that—that was just . . . passing time while you were in Houston? Fucking? Is that what it was?"

"No. *No*. But there's a difference between just passing time and . . ."

"And staying. And committing. And actually *trying*. Is that what you mean?"

"I . . ." *I* what? Am speechless? Confused? Scared? I don't know what to say, or what he wants. We're friends. Good friends. Who have sex. Who were always going to go their separate ways—like *everyone* does. "Levi, this was never meant to . . . I'm just trying to be honest."

"Honest." He lets out a noiseless, bitter laugh; stares at the hummingbird feeder, his tongue roaming the inside of his cheek. "Honesty. You want some honesty?"

"Yes. I just want to be as honest as possible—"

"Here's the honesty: I'm in love with you. But that's not news. Not to me, and not to you, I don't think. Not if you're *honest* with yourself—which you say you are, right?" My eyes widen. He powers on, ruthless, merciless. Levi Ward: force of nature. Sucking the air out of my lungs. "Here's something else that's *honest*: you're in love with me, too."

"Levi." I shake my head, panic licking up my spine. "I—"

"But you're scared. You're scared shitless, and I don't blame you. Tim was a piece of shit and I want to cut off his balls. Your best friend acted

supremely selfishly when you needed her the most. Your parents died when you were a child, and then your extended family—I don't know, maybe they tried their best, but they completely fucked up at giving you the sense of stability you needed. Your sister, whom you clearly adore, is constantly gone, and don't think I don't see the way you obsessively check your phone when she doesn't reply to your texts for longer than ten minutes. And I get it. Why *wouldn't* you be afraid that she'll be taken away from you? Everyone else was. Every single person you've cared about has disappeared from your life, one way or another." I don't know how he manages to look so angry, so calm, so compassionate at the same time. "I understand. I can be patient. I've tried, will try to be patient. But I need . . . something. I need you to understand that this is not a book you're writing. We're not—not two characters you can keep apart because it makes for a literary ending. These are our *lives*, Bee."

There's a tear sliding down my neck. Another, a wet splotch against my collarbone. I screw my eyes shut. "When we went to the conference? And I saw Tim?" He nods. "It was upsetting. Very. But after a while I realized that I didn't really feel anything for him, not anymore, and it was . . . nice. That's what I want, you know? I want *nice*." I've had so little of it. I was always, *always* being left behind. And the only way to *not* be left behind is to leave first. I wipe my cheek with the back of my hand, sniffling. "If *nice* means being alone, then . . . so be it."

"I can give you nice. I can give you better than nice. I can give you *everything*." He smiles at me, full of hope. "You don't even have to admit to yourself that you love me, Bee. God knows I love you enough for the both of us. But I need you to stay. I need you to stick around. Not in Houston, if you don't want to. I'll follow you, if you ask me to. But—"

"And when you get tired of me?" I'm a wet, trembling mess. "When you can't be around anymore? When you meet someone else?"

"I won't," he says, and I hate how sure, how resigned he sounds.

"You don't know that. You *can't* know that. You—"

"There hasn't been anyone else." His jaw tenses and works. "Since the first moment I saw you. Since the first moment I talked to you and made an

ass of myself, there hasn't been anyone else."

Does he— He doesn't mean it. He can't mean *that*.

"Yes," he says ardently, reading my mind. "In *all* the ways you're imagining. If you're going to decide, you should have the facts. I know you're scared—do you think *I'm* not scared?"

"Not the way I am—"

"I spent years—*years*—hoping to find another who could measure up. Hoping to feel something—anything—for someone else. And now you're here, and—I have *had* you, Bee. I know how it can be. You think I don't know what it feels like, to want something so much you're afraid to let yourself take it? Even when it's in front of you? Do you think I'm *not fucking scared*?" He exhales, running a hand through his hair. "Bee. You want to belong. You want someone who won't let go. I'm it. I didn't let go of you for *years*, and I didn't even *have* you. But you need to let me."

It's difficult, looking at him. Because my eyes are blurry. Because he leaves me nothing to hide behind. Because it reminds me of the past few weeks together. Elbows brushing in the kitchen. Cat puns. Fights over what music to put on in the car—and then talking over it anyway. Kisses on the forehead when I'm still asleep. Little bites on my breasts, my hips, my neck, all over me. The smell of hummingbird mint, right before sunset. Laughing because we made a six-year-old laugh. His wrong opinions on Star Wars. The way he holds me through the night. The way he holds me when I need him.

I think of the past few weeks with him. Of a lifetime without him. Of what it would do to me, to have even more and then lose all of it. I think of everything I've made myself give up. Of the cats I won't allow myself to adopt. Of the gut-wrenching work that goes into mending a broken heart.

Levi cups my face, forehead touching mine. His hands—they *are* my home. "Bee. Don't take this from us," he murmurs. Ragged. Careful. Hopeful. "Please."

I've never wanted anything more than to say yes. I've never wished to reach for something as I do now. And I've never been so utterly, petrifyingly scared to lose something.

I make myself look at Levi. My voice shakes, and I say, “I’m sorry. I just . . . I can’t.”

He closes his eyes, staving off a violent wave of something. But after a while he nods. He just nods, without saying anything. A simple, quick movement. Then he lets go of me, puts his hand in his pocket, takes something out, and sets it on the table. The loud click echoes through the room. “This is for you.”

My heart gives a hard thud. “What is it?”

He gives me a small, pained smile. My stomach twists harder. “Just something else to be scared about.”

I stare at the door long after he is gone. Long after I can’t hear his steps anymore. Long after the noise of his truck’s engine pulls out of the parking lot. Long after I’ve exhausted my tears, and long after my cheeks dry. I stare at the door, thinking that in just two days I’ve lost everything I care about, all over again.

Maybe bad things do come in threes after all.

24

RIGHT TEMPORAL LOBE: AHA!

MIGHT BE A bit late in the game to pull my mad-scientist origin story out of its holster, but I'm sitting in the dark, staring at a less-than-flattering reflection of my splotchy face in the balcony doors, the purple of my hair nearly brown—a trick of the light. Someone just ransacked my pockets and stole my most important belongings, and that someone is me. I'm feeling very Dr. Marie Skłodowska-Curie, circa 1911, and I guess it's self-disclosure o'clock.

Originally, I wanted to be a poet. Like my mom. I'd write little sonnets about all sorts of stuff: the rain, pretty birds, the mess Reike made in the kitchen when she tried to bake a cherry pie, kittens playing with yarn—the works. Then we turned ten, and we moved for the fourth time in five years, this time to a mid-sized French town at the border with Germany, where my father's eldest brother had a construction business. He was kind. His wife was kind, if strict. His kids, in their late teens, were kind. The town was kind. My sister's best friend, Ines, was kind. There was lots of kindness going around.

A couple of weeks after moving, I wrote my first poem about loneliness.

Frankly, it was embarrassingly bad. Ten-year-old Bee was an emo princess of darkness. I'd quote the most dramatic verses here, but then I'd

have to kill myself and everyone who read them. Still, at the time I fancied myself the next Emily Dickinson, and I showed the poem to one of my teachers (full-body cringe intensifies). She zeroed in on the first line, which would roughly translate from French to "Sometimes, when I'm alone, I feel my brain shrink," and told me, "That's what really happens. Did you know that?" I hadn't. But in the early 2000s the internet was already a thing, and by the end of the day, when Reike came home from an afternoon at Ines's place, I knew a lot about The Lonely Brain.

It doesn't *shrink*, but it withers a little. Loneliness is not abstract and intangible—metaphors about desert islands and mismatched shoes, Edward Hopper's characters staring at windows, Fiona Apple's entire discography. Loneliness is *here*. It molds our souls, but also our bodies. Right inferior temporal gyri, posterior cingulates, temporoparietal junctions, retrosplenial cortices, dorsal raphe. Lonely people's brains are shaped differently. And I just want mine to . . . not be. I want a healthy, plump, symmetrical cerebrum. I want it to work diligently, impeccably, like the extraordinary machine it's supposed to be. I want it to do as it's told.

Spoiler alert: my stupid brain doesn't. It never did. Not when I was ten. Not when I was twenty. Not eight years later, even though I've tried my best to train it not to expect anything of me. If alone's the baseline, it shouldn't wither. If a cat never gets any treats, he won't miss them. Right? I don't know. Looking at my reflection in the window, I'm not so sure anymore. My brain might be dumber than a cat's. It might be one of Reike's blobfish, swimming aimlessly in the bowl of my skull. I have no idea.

It's June. Almost summer. Sunset doesn't come early anymore—if it's dark outside, Levi must have left hours ago. I stand gingerly from the couch, feeling heavy and weightless. An old woman and a newborn calf. Wretched little me, still containing multitudes. But as much as I'd rather wallow in self-pity, this situation is a grave of my own digging. There are things I need to do. People I need to take care of.

First, Rocío. She's not in her apartment and doesn't pick up when I call—because she's with Kaylee trying to forget today's fustercluck, because she hates me, because she's a Gen Z. Could be all three, but what I have to

tell her is important, and I've already hurt her chances to get into the Ph.D. program of her dreams enough, so I email her.

> Whatever happens with BLINK, get in touch with Trevor ASAP and ask him to let you stay on the project as the RA (I'd do it, but it's best if it doesn't come from me). Levi will support this. What happened today is my responsibility only and won't reflect on you.

Okay. One down. I swallow, take a deep breath, and tap on the Twitter app. Shmac's next: he needs to know what's going on with STC. That if he continues to associate with Marie, things could go south very quickly. I still don't know what the hell happened, but publicly disavowing me might be best for him.

I DM him to ask if he has a minute, but he doesn't immediately reply. *Probably with the girl,* I tell myself. After my disastrous conversation with Levi, the idea of someone brave enough to seize that kind of love, intense and eviscerating and gutting and joyful, fills me with an envy so overwhelming I have to push back against it with my entire self.

I click on Shmac's profile, wondering when's the last time he was online. He hasn't tweeted much in the past week—mostly #FairGraduateAdmissions stuff, comments on the peer-review system, a joke about how he'd *love* to be writing, but with his cat sitting on his laptop he really can't—

Wait.

What?

I click on the picture attached to the tweet. A black cat is snoozing on top of the keyboard. It's short-haired and green-eyed and . . .

Not Schrödinger. It can't be. All black cats look the same, after all. And this picture—I can barely make out the cat's face. There's no way to tell who—

The background, though. The background . . . I know that backsplash. The dark-blue tiles are just like the ones in Levi's kitchen, the ones I stared at for half an hour last week after he bent me over the counter, and even without them I can see the edge of a carton of soy milk in the picture, which Levi finds "gross, Bee, just gross" but started buying when I told him it was my favorite, and . . .

No. No, no, no. Impossible. Shmac is . . . a five-eight nerd with a beer belly and male-pattern baldness. Not the most perfect Cute Sexy Handsome Guy™ in the world. "No," I say. As if it'll somehow make everything go away—the last few disastrous days, Shmac's tweet, the possibility of . . . of *this*. But the picture is still there, with the tiles, the soy milk, and the—

"Shmac," I whisper. Hands shaking, out of breath, I scroll back up our message history. The girl. The *girl*. We started talking about the girl when I —when *did* we first talk about her? I check the dates, vision blurry once again. The day I moved to Houston was the first time he mentioned her to me. Someone from his past. But, no—he told me she was married. He said her husband had lied to her. And I'm not, so—

But he thought I was. He thought Tim and I were together. For a long time. And Tim *did* lie to me.

"Levi." I swallow, hard. "Levi." This is impossible. Things like these—they don't happen in real life. In my life. These coincidences, they're for *You've Got Mail* and nineties rom-coms, not for— My eyes fall on the longest message he sent me.

I know the shape of her. I go to sleep thinking about it, and then I wake up, go to work, and she is there, and it's impossible.

Oh my God.

I want to push her against a wall, and I want her to push back.

I did that, didn't I? He pushed me against a wall, and I pushed back. And pushed. And pushed. And pushed. And now I've pushed him away for good, forever, even though . . . Oh, *God*. He has offered me *everything*, everything I've ever wanted. And I am such a cowardly, idiotic fool.

I wipe my cheek, and my eyes fall on the object Levi left on the table. It's a flash drive, pretty, shaped like a cat's paw. A calico's. My laptop

doesn't have a USB port, so I frantically look for an adapter—which *of course* is at the bottom of the damn suitcase. There's one single document on the drive. *F.mp4*. I plop down on the pile of unfolded clothes I just tossed around and immediately click on it.

I knew there were cameras everywhere in the Discovery Building, but not that Levi had access to them. And I don't understand why he'd give me thirty minutes of night surveillance footage. I frown, wondering if he uploaded the wrong file, when something small and fair slinks in the corner of the monitor.

Félicette.

The date says April 14, only a few days before I moved to Houston. Félicette looks a little smaller than the last time I saw her. She trots across the hallway, glances around, then disappears around the corner. My body leans in to the screen to follow her, but the movie cuts to April 22. Félicette jumps on one of the couches in the lobby. She circles around, finds a good spot, and starts napping with her head on her paws. Wet laughter bubbles out of me, and the video changes again—the engineering lab is semi dark, but Félicette is sniffing tools I've seen Levi use. Licking water from the drip tray of the break room's water dispenser. Running up and down the stairs. Giving herself a bath by the conference room windows.

And then, of course, in my office. Scratching her claws on my chair's armrests. Eating the treats I left out for her. Dozing on the little bed I set up in the corner. I'm laughing again, I'm *crying* again, because—I knew it. I *knew* it. And Levi knew it, too—this is not something he put together quickly last night. This is hours and hours of combing through footage. He must have known Félicette existed for a while, and—I want to strangle him. I want to kiss him. I want *everything*.

I guess this is it—being in love. Truly in love. Lots and lots of horrible, wondrous, violent emotions. It doesn't suit me. Maybe it's for the best that I sent Levi away. I could never live with this—it'd raze me to the ground in less than a week, and—

I want to push her against a wall, and I want her to push back.

Oh, Levi. Levi. *I can be fearless. I can be as fearless and honest as you are. If you will teach me.*

I sit back, let the tears flow, watch some more. She really did like my desk, Félicette. More than Rocío's. As the date changes, she nestles around my computer more often. Steps where I found her little paw prints. Delicately sniffs the rim of my cup. Chews on my computer's power cable. Scurries away when the door opens, and—

Wait.

I stop the video and lean forward. It's clear from the shift of the lights that someone is coming inside, but the video immediately cuts to new footage. Who would open the door of my office at—2:37 a.m.? Cleaners always came by late afternoons. Rocío is committed to BLINK, but not two-thirty-a.m. committed. Hell, *I'm* not two-thirty-a.m. committed.

I wipe my tears, press the space bar, and let the video run, hoping for an explanation. It doesn't come, but something else does. A segment dated two days ago, again in my office. Just a handful of seconds of Félicette sleeping at my desk. My monitor is on.

I don't leave my computer unlocked. Not ever.

I stop the video and zoom in as much as I can, feeling like a tinfoil-hatted conspiracy theorist. The video is just high-def enough that I can make out . . .

"Is that my *Twitter*?" I ask no one.

Impossible. I'd never log into WWMD on a work computer. For obvious reasons, chief among them that Rocío has a perfect visual of it. But it's right there, unless I'm hallucinating, and—it might be keychain access? But still . . .

"Félicette?" I whisper. "Do you turn on my computer in the wee hours of the night? Do you log in with my NASA password? Do you use Twitter to catfish underage kittens?" She doesn't. She would never. But it sure looks like someone *is*, and that doesn't make any sense at all. Or maybe it does. Maybe it totally does, given the weird activity from my Twitter account. *Shit*.

I paw at the table for my phone and text Levi. My fingers shake when I read his last texts, but I force myself to power through.

BEE: How do I get access to the complete security footage of the Discovery Building?

A minute passes. Three. Seven. I call him—no answer. I look at the clock—fifteen minutes past eleven. Does he hate me? No more than I hate myself. Is that why he's not answering? Is he asleep? Maybe he's not checking his phone.

Shit. I'll email him.

> How do I get access to the complete security footage of the Discovery Building? Please let me know ASAP. Something weird's going on.

Then I have an idea, and don't bother waiting for his reply. I slip my shoes on, grab my NASA badge with a silent prayer to Dr. Curie that it still works, and run out to the Space Center.

Something *very* weird's going on. I'm 99.9 percent sure that I am right—and 43 percent sure that I am wrong.

• • •

I STUB MY toe on the edge of the elevator, stumbling into the second floor's hallway with a loud, "Ow!"

Very suave, Bee. Perhaps I shouldn't have worn sandals. Perhaps I should have stayed at home. Perhaps I'm going insane.

Whatever. I'll go to my office, check my computer for anything weird, return home with my tail between my legs. What else do I have to do? My scientific career is over, my good name is soon to be besmirched, and I'm at once too emotionally unavailable to be with the man I love and too in love with him to deal with my own choices. I can spare twenty minutes to sleuth

before I go back to browsing the Teen Drama hidden code on Netflix and wishing vegan Chunky Monkey existed.

My (former?) office looks like it always does—homey, cluttered. No sign of Félicette. I sit at my desk, log in. Sure enough, if I navigate to the Twitter page, my password seems to be saved. My heart thuds. My stomach lurches. I look around, but the building is deserted. Okay. Okay, so someone could have conceivably accessed WWMD from this computer.

And messaged the STC guy? Yikes.

But who? Rocío? No. Not my little goth. Levi? Nah. He was in bed with me every night in the past weeks, and most of the time we weren't even sleeping. Who else, then? And why would they contact STC posing as me? To make me look bad. But *why*? These kinds of machinations require a degree of committed hatred that someone like me could never inspire. I'm too boring.

I drum my fingers, wondering if I'm a lunatic, when something else occurs to me. Something much, much bigger: if someone logged into my computer, they wouldn't just have access to my stupid social media, but to BLINK's server, too.

"Holy shit."

I navigate to the server repository. "No way." I click on the folder where the documents pertaining to today's demonstration are. "Impossible. I'm crazy. No one would—" How the hell did Levi access the logs? God, I hate engineers. They always type so quickly. "Was it—here? Where the hell did he click? Ah, yes—" I open the log for the file used for Guy's brain stimulation. The one I finalized three days ago. The one that should be locked to anyone except for me.

It was modified last night. At 1:24 a.m. By me.

Except that last night I was tossing and turning in bed.

Okay. So it was modified by someone on this computer. "Who the fuck —"

"Are you okay?"

I startle so hard, I yelp and throw my mouse across the room. It misses Guy by a few inches.

“Oh my God.” I press my hand against my mouth. “I’m sorry—you scared me and I—” I laugh into my palm, high on relief, low-key thankful I didn’t shit my pants. It was touch and go for a second. “I’m *so* sorry. I wasn’t trying to kill you for the second time in one day!”

He smiles, leaning against the doorframe. “Third time’s the charm.”

“Oh, God.” I press a hand against my forehead. My heart’s calming down, and I remember the last time I saw Guy. He didn’t look good. Because *I* gave him a seizure. “How are you?”

He gestures at himself with a self-deprecating smile. “Back to my hunky self. You don’t look too good, though.”

“I’m having an . . . interesting day. Guy, I want to apologize for what happened today. I take full responsibility for—”

“You shouldn’t.”

“I should.” I lift my hand. “I absolutely should. It looks like something weird is happening—I’ll show you. But that doesn’t matter. With your safety at stake I should have been more careful. I take full responsibility, and—”

“You shouldn’t,” he repeats, his tone a touch firmer. Something about it rubs me wrong. His eyes are usually a warm golden-brown, but tonight there’s an odd coldness about them.

I realize that I have no idea why he’s here. Well past eleven. In my office. After a day spent at the hospital, shouldn’t he be resting? I’m pretty sure he should be resting.

“Are you . . . did you forget something?” I stand to obstruct his view of my monitor, not quite knowing why. “It’s late.”

“Yeah.” He shrugs. I’m acutely conscious that he’s blocking the only exit. I’m also acutely conscious that I’m a raving lunatic. This is Guy. My friend. Levi’s friend. An astronaut. I just gave him a seizure, for fuck’s sake. *Of course* he looks weird.

“Are you . . . I was heading home. I’m done with . . . what I came for.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. Want to leave together?”

He doesn't move. "You said there was something weird you wanted to show me?" Why is he not smiling?

"No, I . . ." I wipe my palm against the side of my thigh. It's gross, clammy. My grandmother's ring catches on the seam. "I misspoke."

"I don't think you did."

My heart skips several beats. Then it gallops, twenty times faster. "It doesn't matter." I need my stupid voice to shake less. "I gotta go. It's late, and I'm technically off BLINK. I shouldn't even be here—Boris will have me arrested." I lean back. Turn off my computer, keeping my eyes on Guy the entire time. Then I make my way to the door. "Well, have a good night. Could you let me through? I can't quite—"

"Bee." He doesn't move. His tone is slightly reproachful. "You're making things complicated for me."

I swallow. Audibly. "Why?"

"Because."

"Because . . . what? Is it the seizure? I really didn't mean to—"

"I think it would be hypocritical of me to get testy about that." He sighs, and I'm instantly aware of how much larger than me he is. He's nothing like Levi, but I'm as big as five bananas in a trench coat, which might be a . . . a problem?

"What's going on?" I whisper. "Guy?"

"What have you told Levi?" he asks, his expression a mix of calm and irritation. A parent cleaning up after a child spilled a glass of milk.

". . . Told Levi?"

"About the security footage. Did you talk to him on the phone after you emailed him?"

I freeze. "How do you know I emailed him?"

"Answer me, please."

"H-how do you know? About my email?" I retreat until the backs of my legs hit my desk.

"Bee." He rolls his eyes. "I've been in and out of your email for a long time. Making sure Levi's messages couldn't reach you. Creating some . . .

miscommunications. You know, there's a reason websites tell you to use difficult passwords, MarieMonAmour123."

"It was *you*." I gasp, trying to step even farther away. There's nowhere to go. "How did you get into my computer?"

"I set it up." He gives me an incredulous look. "You're not very good at technology, are you?"

I frown, pulled right out of shock and into furious outrage. "Hey! I can code in *three* programming languages!"

"Is one of them HTML?"

I flush. "HTML is valid, you *stemlord*. And I minored in computer science. And why the hell were you *in my damn email*?!"

"Because, Bee, you wouldn't just mind *your damn business*." He takes a step toward me, nostrils flaring. "Did you know that the Sullivan prototype should have been called Kowalsky-Sullivan? Of course, Peter had to get his head smashed—" He stops, pausing for a moment. "Okay, this came out wrong. I was sorry when it happened. But my work on BLINK was erased. By virtue of dying, Peter got all the credit, and—it would have been fine. But then Levi offered to lead BLINK out of some misplaced guilt, and they chose *him* over me. I had no control over something I spent *years* working on." His voice rises. He comes closer and I flatten against the desk. "And for so long I was sure BLINK wouldn't get done, that it'd be delayed, that Levi would move on to other things—he wasn't even doing neuroimaging anymore, did you know that? If it hadn't been for Peter, he'd still be at the Jet Propulsion Lab. But no. He had to poach my project."

"What did you do?" I murmur.

"I did what I had to. This morning I took a few caffeine pills, just to be, you know . . . excitable. And I fudged the protocols. But you put me in this situation. You and Levi. Because, Bee—oh, Bee, he was *obsessed* with you. The second NIH nominated you, he *had* to make BLINK happen. And I tried to do what I could—make you guys fight a little. Little delays. Missing files. For a while you seemed stuck, and I hoped time would run out and you'd go back to NIH." His eyes are a little crazed. "But you cracked it.

And . . . I had to do it. Today had to happen. They won't let Levi stay on the project."

"On Twitter. What did you do on Twitter?"

He runs a hand down his face. "That was— I wasn't going to involve you, believe it or not. But when I found out that you weren't really married, that Levi lied to me, I was *very* upset. It didn't take long to realize that . . . I cannot believe you're fucking him, Bee. Your Twitter was on your computer, and I'd been following your online identity, so . . . I knew what to do."

"Oh my *God*."

"You were supposed to *hate* him! When NIH selected you, Levi told me you had issues in the past. And I thought—perfect!" He sighs like he's deeply tired. "And then you fell in love. Who *does* that?"

"Are you crazy?"

"I'm *angry*. Because it would have worked out great if you hadn't noticed the security footage. I guess I got a bit sloppy at editing myself out? Why were you looking at it, anyway?"

I shake my head. I'm not explaining Félicette to this asshole. "You *are* crazy."

"Yeah." He closes his eyes. "Maybe."

I look around for— I'm not sure what. A siren? A baseball bat? One of those portable transporters from *Star Trek*? "Let me go," I say.

"Bee." He opens his eyes. "You don't need to be an evil mastermind to acknowledge that I *cannot* let you go."

"You sort of have to. You can't do anything to me. There are cameras—"

"—whose footage we established I can doctor—thanks to your RA, by the way. I only got access to the surveillance circuit after catching her in flagrante."

"You still used your badge to come in—"

"—I didn't, actually. Pretty easy to clone an anonymous badge."

My fingers shake when I grip my desk. "What's your plan, then?"

He takes something out of his pocket. No. No.

No, no, *no*.

“Is that a gun?” I gasp out.

“Yeah.” He sounds almost apologetic. My entire world stops.

I’m used to being scared. I live my life in fear—fear of being abandoned, fear of failing, fear of losing everything. But this is different. Is it terror? Real, hindbrain terror? Is this how the lady feels in *Scream* and *Scream 2*, *3*, and *4*, when she realizes that the caller is in the house? Did they ever make 5? God, will I die before *Scream 5* hits theaters?

“What— Where did you even— Is that real?”

“Yeah. Really easy to get one.” He holds the gun like he hates it almost as much as I do. “NRA’s crazy here.”

“I guess I’m having the full Texas experience,” I mumble, numb. This cannot be happening. I’m well-acquainted with stemlords’ disregard for women, but one wanting to *kill* me? A step too fucking far. “Do you even know how to use that?”

“They teach you. During astronaut training. Insert Space Force joke.” He laughs once, humorlessly. “But I won’t need to use it. Because we’re going up to the roof. Poor little Bee. In a few short days she lost *everything*. Couldn’t handle the stress. Decided to jump.”

“I will do no such—”

Guy points the gun at me.

Oh, *shit*. I’m going to die. In my stupid office. Killed by a stemlord. I’m going to die without having had a cat. I’m going to die without having admitted to Levi that I love him more than I thought possible. Without a chance to show him—to show *myself*—that I can be brave.

At least Marie had Pierre for a while. At least she took a chance. At least she *tried* not to act like the stupid coward I’ve been and oh *God*, maybe if I beg Guy he’ll let me text Levi and I’ll be able to tell him, I just want to tell him, it seems such a waste not to have told him, and—

A meowing sound. We both turn. Félicette is on the filing cabinet near the door, growling at Guy. He gives her a confused look. “What the hell is—”

Félicette pounces on him with a shriek, clutching his head and clawing at him. Guy thrashes around, leaving the door empty. I sprint out of the

room, running as fast as I can—not nearly fast enough. I can hear steps right behind me.

"Stop! Bee, stop, or I'm fucking going to—"

I'm at the end of the hallway. My legs are giving out, my lungs on fire. He's going to kill me. Oh my God, he's going to kill me.

I turn the corner and dart to the landing. Guy yells something I cannot make out. I take my phone out to call 911, but there is a string of loud noises behind me. Shit, has he *shot me*? No, not a gunshot.

I turn around, expecting to see him come at me, but—

Levi.

Levi?

Levi.

He and Guy are tussling on the floor, grunting and struggling and rolling around in a vicious, violent embrace. I stare at them for several seconds, open-mouthed, paralyzed. Levi's bigger, but Guy has a fucking *gun*, and when he adjusts his grip to aim at Levi I—

Levi!

I don't even think about it—I run back to where the fight is happening and kick Guy in the ribs so forcefully, I feel a zing of pain travel from my toes up my spinal cord.

I blink, and by the time my eyes are open again Levi's pinning Guy to the floor, holding his arms behind his back. The gun has skittered several feet away. It is, in fact, very close to me.

I look at it. Consider picking it up. Decide not to.

Levi.

"You okay, Bee?" He sounds winded.

I nod. "He . . . he . . ." Guy is struggling. Demanding to be let go. Swearing. Insulting Levi, me, the world. My legs feel like Jell-O—the off-brand one, which doesn't bounce very well. I could use a puke bucket.

"Bee?" Levi says.

". . . Yeah?"

"Can you do something for me, sweetheart?"

Unlikely. "Yeah?"

“I want you to take a step to your right. Another. Another.” My knee hits the edge of one of the lobby couches. Levi smiles, like he’s incredibly proud of me. “Perfect. Now sit down.”

I do it, confused. There’s something wet on my hand. I look down: Félicette is licking my fingers. “I . . . Why?”

“Because I’ll need to restrain Guy until security gets here. And I won’t be able to catch you when you pass out.”

“But I . . .” My eyelids flutter closed, and . . .

Well. You know the drill by now.

25

ORIENS-LACUNOSUM MOLECULARE INTERNEURONS: COURAGE

"NOT TO BE whiny," I tell the nurse with a desperate-yet-grateful-yet-really-desperate smile. "I appreciate everything you're doing, but NIH has notoriously crappy health insurance, and if I told you what a recent Ph.D. makes a year, you'd discharge me immediately." And give me ten bucks for the cab home.

"NASA will cover this," Kaylee says. She's on the bed next to me, leaning against my pillow as she shows me the wonders of TikTok. I'm clearly going to have to download this time-sinking black hole of an app.

"Or you'll sue them," Rocío adds from the guest chair. She's sprawled comfortably, a GRE prep manual on her lap and her booted feet on top of the covers. The things I let her do, just because she is, as Kaylee would put it, "my fave."

"I'm not going to sue NASA."

"What if they decide to call their next Mars rover *The Marie Curie* but they end up misspelling it *The Mariah Carey*?"

I mull it over. "I might sue in that case."

Rocío gives me a pleased *I know you* smile. My phone buzzes.

REIKE: OMG you're on the NEWS

REIKE: HERE IN NORWAY IN THIS PUB I'M AT

REIKE: Is this what stardom feels like?

I close my eyes, which proves to be a mistake. The image of Reike climbing over the counter of a Bergen dive bar and pointing at the TV is disturbingly vivid.

BEE: You don't even speak Norwegian.

REIKE: No, but the news lady said NASA and Houston, and they put the mugshot of the Guy guy on the screen

REIKE: lol the Guy guy I'm hilarious

BEE: Are you drunk?

REIKE: LISTEN MY FAVORITE SISTER ALMOST GOT KILLED LAST NIGHT I'M ALLOWED TO DROWN MY TRAUMA IN SOME NORWEGIAN LIQUOR THAT I CANNOT PRONOUNCE

BEE: I'm your only sister.

REIKE:

I lock my phone and slide it under the pillow. I don't even know why I'm in a hospital. The doctors said that me passing out was concerning, and I almost laughed in their faces. I just want to go home. Stare out of the window. Think wistfully about the ephemeral nature of human existence. Watch cat videos.

"Here it says that 'abreast' means 'up to date' and has nothing whatsoever to do with boobs." Rocío stares at the vocab section of her manual. "Sounds fake."

Kaylee and I exchange a worried look.

"And 'bombastic' is a real word? This can't be right."

"Babe, I'll start tutoring you again as soon as NASA's not being sabotaged anymore."

I give Kaylee a grateful smile. She and Rocío were in the hospital room this morning when I woke up, and they've stuck around since then like the amazing human beings they are. I now know more about body decomposition *and* makeup palettes than I thought I ever would, but I regret nothing. This is almost nice.

Then Boris enters the room with a bleak expression. Closely followed by Levi.

My heart flutters. When I asked about him this morning, the girls told me he was with law enforcement in the Discovery Building. He meets my eyes, gives me a small smile, and sets a bag and a box of my favorite brand of vegan brownies on my bedside table.

Boris stands beside the bed, rubbing his forehead, looking tired, aggravated, at the end of his rope. I wonder if he slept at all. Poor man.

"I'm at an impasse, Bee." He sighs. "NASA firmly instructed me not to apologize to you because it would be admissible evidence if you decided to sue, but . . ." He shrugs. "I *am* sorry, and—"

"Don't." I smile. "Don't piss off your lawyers over this. I was right there with you, thinking that it was my error. I didn't know Guy was batshit crazy, and I worked with him every day—how could you?"

"Guy will . . . He is fired, of course. And there will be legal repercussions. We'll resume BLINK the second the Discovery Building is not caked in yellow tape, with another demonstration. I explained everything to NIH and my superiors, and of course I am begging you on my knees to return—"

"You're standing," Rocío points out, unimpressed. Levi looks away, biting back a smile.

"Rocío," I scold her gently.

"What? Make him grovel harder."

I give her a fond look. "None of this was his fault. Plus, think how good your Ph.D. applications will look when they come with a recommendation letter from the Director of Research at the Johnson Space Center." I hold Boris's gaze. After a moment he nods, defeated. He needs a nap. Or nine coffees.

"I'd be happy to, Ms. Cortoreal. You deserve it."

"Will you mention that I had sex at work with the most beautiful woman in the world?" She glances at Kaylee, who blushes prettily.

"I—" He rubs his temple. "I actually forgot about that."

"Is that a firm no? Because it's one of my proudest accomplishments."

Boris leaves a few minutes later. Levi pulls up a chair and sits next to me to catch us up. “I’m not sure what the charges are, but Guy was so high up, had access to so much information, we’ll have to double-check every single chunk of code we ever wrote, every piece of hardware. It’s a setback—a big one. But BLINK will be fine, ultimately.” He doesn’t seem too concerned.

“He has a kid, doesn’t he?” Kaylee asks.

“Yeah. He had a nasty divorce last year, which I don’t think helped with . . . whatever happened. I was with him a lot, but I didn’t see it. I really didn’t.”

“Obviously,” Rocío mutters. Levi and I share an amused look, and . . .

It sticks, a little bit. It’s hard for me to let go of his eyes, and for him to let go of mine. I suspect it’s because the last time I saw him was such a mess, and the time before an even messier mess. And now we’re here, in front of this messy mess, and . . .

It’s difficult to breathe.

“Well,” Kaylee says, jumping up, “Rocío and I gotta go.”

Rocío frowns. “Where?”

“Ah, to bed.”

“But it’s three in the afterno—” Kaylee drags her up by the wrist, but when they’re at the door Rocío frees herself and comes to stand in front of Levi.

“I must thank you. For saving Bee’s life,” she says solemnly. “To me, she is like a mother. The mother I never had.”

“You have an amazing mother back in Baltimore,” I point out, “and I’m only five years older than you.” I am ignored.

“I want to give you a token. To acknowledge your contributions.”

“There’s no need,” Levi says, just as solemnly.

Rocío rummages in her jeans pocket and offers him an unwrapped, slightly squished red gumball.

“Thank you. This is . . .” He looks at the gum. “A thing that I now have.”

Rocío nods somberly, and then Levi and I are alone. Well. With the gumball.

"Did you want it?" he asks me.

"I could never. It's your reward for saving my life."

"Pretty sure you saved your own life."

"It was a team effort." There is a small lull, a not-exactly-unpleasant silence. I find that I can't quite meet Levi's gaze, so I glance around. "Are the brownies for me?"

"I wasn't sure what the food options were." He wets his lips. "The bag's for you, too."

"Oh." I peek. Inside there's something wrapped in newspaper. I put it in my lap and start unrolling it. "It's not Guy's heart that you cut out of his chest, is it?"

He shakes his head. "I already fed that to Schrödinger."

"I—" I pause mid-action. "I'm *so* sorry. I cannot imagine how hard it must be. He's one of your closest friends, and the fact that he was so jealous of you and Peter is . . ."

"Yeah, I . . . I'll go talk to him. When it's been a while and I want to punch him less. But for now . . ." He shrugs. "You should open that."

I resume. It's about five layers before I can make out what it is.

"A mug?" I turn it around and break into a grin. "Oh my God, *Yoda Best Neuroscientist*! You had it made!"

"Look inside, too."

I do. "A bobblehead? Is this Marie Curie?" I lift it up, grinning. "She's standing in front of her lab bench! And she's wearing— This was her wedding gown, did you know that?"

"I didn't." He hesitates before adding: "I won this in middle school. Second place at the science fair. The beakers she's holding glow in the dark."

My smile vanishes slowly. I'm too busy staring at Marie's pretty face to realize that I've heard that science fair story once before. No. No, I didn't hear it. I read it. On my . . .

My arms fall into my lap. "You know. You know about . . ."

He nods. “I reviewed the security footage. I didn’t notice at first, but after you wrote that text—I was jogging, by the way, so maybe next time give me fifteen minutes or so before jumping headfirst into danger *alone*—after your text I looked at the footage more closely. And saw your computer.”

I stare at him. I’m wholly unprepared for this conversation. “I . . .”

“Did you know all along?”

“No.” I shake my hand vehemently. “No, I— The picture. Schrödinger, was— You tweeted it. And then I . . . I had no idea. Before yesterday.”

Levi just leans forward, elbows on his knees, and looks at me patiently. “Me neither.” He smiles wryly. “Or I wouldn’t have talked *about* you *with* you so much.”

“Oh.” I flush as vermillion as a cardinal male at the peak of mating season. My heart thrashes in my chest—also like a cardinal male at the peak of mating season. “Right.”

The things he said.

I want to push her against a wall, and I want her to push back.

The.

Things.

He.

Said.

“Are you okay?” he asks, concerned. It’s warranted: I might be in the midst of a cardiac event.

“I—I’m fine. I . . . Have you ever seen *You’ve Got Mail*?”

“Nope.” He gives me a hesitant look. “Maybe we could watch it together?”

Yes, I want to say. I even open my mouth, but no sound comes out of my stupid, stubborn, petrified vocal box. I try again: nothing. Still nothing. My fingers clench the sheets, and I study the amused, knowing expression in his eyes. Like he fully understands what’s going on inside me.

“Did you know that she used to be a governess? Marie Curie?”

I nod, slightly taken aback. “She had an agreement with her sister. Marie worked as a governess and helped her sister pay for med school. Then, once

her sister had a job, they flipped."

"So you know about Kazimierz Żorawski?"

I tilt my head. "The mathematician?"

"He eventually became one—a good one, too. But initially he was just one of the sons of the family Marie worked for. He and Marie were the same age, both exceptionally . . ."

"Nerdy?"

"You know the type." He flashes a smile, which fades almost immediately. "They fell in love, but he was rich, she wasn't, and back then things weren't as simple as wanting to marry someone."

"His parents separated them," I murmur. "They were heartbroken."

"Maybe it was destiny. If she'd stayed in Poland, she wouldn't have met Pierre. The two of them were very happy by all accounts. The idea of radioactivity was hers, but Pierre helped her out. Kazimierz was a mathematician; he might not have been as involved in her research." Levi shrugs. "It's all a bunch of what-ifs."

I nod.

"But he never really got over Marie. Żorawski, I mean. He married a pianist, had children—named one Maria, which is amusing—studied in Germany, became a professor at Warsaw Polytechnic, worked on . . . geometry, I believe. He lived a full life. And yet, as an old man, he could be found sitting in front of Marie Curie's statue in Warsaw. Staring for hours. Thinking about who knows what. A bunch of what-ifs, maybe." The green of Levi's eyes is so bright I can't look away. "Maybe about whatever little personality quirk of Marie made him fall for her a handful of decades before."

"Do you think . . ." My cheeks are wet. I don't bother wiping them. "Do you think she used to cook terrible stir-fries?"

"I can see that." He bites the inside of his cheek. "Maybe she also insisted on feeding a murder of imaginary cats."

"I'll have you know that Félicette saved my life."

"I saw that. It was very impressive."

Carts roll in the hallway outside. A door closes, and another opens. Someone laughs.

"Levi?"

"Yes?"

"Do you think they . . . Marie, and Pierre, and the mathematician, and everyone else . . . do you think they ever wished they'd just never met? Never been in love?"

He nods, as though he's considered the matter before. "I really don't know, Bee. But I do know that I never have. Not once."

The hallway is suddenly silent. An odd musical chaos pounds sweetly inside my head. A precipice, this one. A deep, dangerous ocean to leap into. Maybe it's a bad idea. Maybe I should be scared. Maybe I will regret this. Maybe, maybe, maybe.

Maybe this feels like home.

"Levi?"

He looks at me, calm. Hopeful. So patient, my love.

"Levi, I—"

The door opens with a sudden noise. "How are you feeling today, Bee?" My doctor steps in with a nurse in tow.

Levi's eyes linger on me for one more second. Or five. But then he stands. "I was just about to head out."

I watch his small smile as he waves goodbye. I watch the way his hair curls on his nape as he steps out. I watch the door close behind him, and when the doctor starts asking me questions about my useless parasympathetic nervous system, it's all I can do not to glare at her.

• • •

TWO DAYS.

Two days, I'm in the damn hospital. Then the doctor discharges me with a squinty, distrustful, "There doesn't seem to be anything wrong with you." Rocío picks me up with our rental ("In ancient Egypt, female corpses were kept at home until they decomposed to avoid necrophilia at the embalmer's.

Did you know that?" "*Now* I do."), and is just as squinty and distrustful when I ask her to drop me off at the Discovery Building—and to please leave the car in the parking lot.

There's no police tape inside. In fact, I meet several non-BLINK engineers in the hallways. I smile politely, shrug off their curious, intrigued looks, and head for my office. There's a Do Not Enter sign on the wall. I ignore it.

I walk out six hours later, not quite gracefully. I'm carrying a large box and I can't see my feet, so I trip a lot. (Who am I kidding? I *always* trip a lot.) In the car, I tinker with my phone, searching for a good song, and find none I care to listen to.

It's dark already, past sundown. For some unfathomable reason, the silent lights of the Houston skyline make me think of Paris at the turn of the twentieth century. The Belle Époque, they called it. While Dr. Curie holed up in her shed-slash-lab, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec chugged absinthe at the Moulin Rouge. Edgar Degas creeped on ballet dancers and bathing ladies. Marcel Proust bent over his desk, writing books I'll never get around to reading. Auguste Rodin sculpted thinking men and grew impressive beards. The Lumière brothers laid the foundation for masterpieces such as *Citizen Kane*, *The Empire Strikes Back*, the *American Pie* franchise.

I wonder if Marie ever went out at night. Every once in a while. I wonder if Pierre ever pried a beaker full of uranium ore out of her hand and dragged her to Montmartre for a walk or a show. I wonder if they had fun, in the few years they had together.

Yes. I'm sure they did. I'm sure they had a blast. And I'm sure, like I've never been sure before, that she never regretted anything. That she treasured every second.

The solar lights are on in Levi's yard, just bright enough for me to see the hummingbird mint, purple and yellow and red. I smile and lift the large, light box from the passenger seat, stopping to coo at it. I know about the spare key hidden under a pot of rosemary, but I ring the doorbell anyway. While I wait, I try to spy into the air holes I carved on the top. Can't see much.

“Bee?”

I look up. Breathless. Not scared. I’m not scared anymore.

“Hi. I . . . Hi.” He’s so handsome. Stupidly, unjustly handsome. I want to look at his stupidly, unjustly handsome face for . . . for as long as I possibly can. Could be a minute. Hopefully, it’ll be seventy years.

“Are you okay?”

I take a deep breath. Schrödinger’s here, too; staring up quizzically at me and my cargo. “Hi.”

“Hi. Are you . . . ?” Levi reaches for me. Abruptly stops himself. “Hey.”

“I was wondering . . .” I lift up the box. Hold it out to him. Clear my throat. “I was wondering . . . do you think poor Schrödinger would hate us if we adopted another cat?”

Levi blinks at me, confused. “What do you—?”

Inside the box, Félicette explodes in a long, plaintive meow. Her pink nose peeks out from one of the air holes, her paw from another. I let out a wet, bubbly, happy laugh. Turns out I’m crying again.

Through the tears, I see understanding on Levi’s face. Then pure, overwhelming, knee-shaking joy in his eyes. But it’s only a moment. By the time he reaches over to take the box from my hands, he is grounded. Solid. Profoundly, quietly happy.

“I think,” he says slowly, carefully, his voice a little thick, “that we won’t know until we try.”

EPILOGUE

HERE'S MY FAVORITE piece of trivia in the whole world: Dr. Marie Skłodowska-Curie and Dr. Bee Königswasser-Ward showed up to their wedding ceremonies wearing their lab gowns.

Well. Clothes. Gowns aren't really a thing anymore. Unless you're walking the red carpet at the Met Gala or . . . well, getting married, I guess. Which I was. *But*. I was wearing a Target dress—yup, *the* Target dress—which I sometimes wear at work. And I work in a NASA lab, which technically makes it "lab clothes." I guess I'm a pragmatic gal, too.

Levi and I aren't going to have a ceremony until this summer. July 26, to be precise. I'd explain why I picked that date, but it might shift your opinion of me from "quirky Marie Curie fangirl" to "dangerously obsessive stalker," so . . . yeah. I'll let you google it, if you must. Anyway, even though we're married, only a handful of people know. Reike, for instance ("Should I hyphenate my name, too? Mareike Königswasser-Ward. Nice ring to it, huh?"). Penny and Lily (our impromptu witnesses). Schrödinger and Félicette, of course, but they didn't care too much when we told them. They just blinked sleepily at us and went back to napping on top of each other, stirring only when a dollop of celebratory whipped cream appeared.

Ungrateful creatures. I love them.

It's a bit odd, the way our elopement came about. I noticed Levi's frustration when, around the ninth time he proposed, I told him that I *did* want to marry him, but I was traumatized by the last-minute split of my

previous engagement (and by the thousands of dollars wasted in security deposits). But the solution to this mess appeared to me in a dream. (That's a lie: I was plucking my eyebrows.)

I secretly applied for a marriage license. Then, on a random Thursday morning, I told him I wanted to drive the truck (he was *not* a fan, but hid it well). He thought we were heading to work (hence the Target dress), but instead I sneakily navigated us to the courthouse. In the already-crowded early-morning parking lot, while he looked around to figure out where the hell we were, I told him I'd marry him that very day. That I couldn't be afraid of him leaving me at the altar if we'd already tied the knot. That I wouldn't even make him sign a prenup to prevent him from claiming rights to my limited-edition *Empire Strikes Back* DVD, because I wasn't planning on divorcing him. Ever.

"I guess I should properly ask," I said after methodically explaining my reasoning, "will you marry me, Levi?" To which he said, "Yeah." Hoarse. Tongue-tied. Breathless. Handsome, so handsome that I had to kiss him, a little tearfully. And by "a little" I mean "a lot." And by "tearfully" I mean that snot was involved. It was ugly, kids.

And it was beautiful.

After a ninety-four-second ceremony we drove to the Space Center, made up an excuse for being late, and I had Lean Cuisine at my desk while frowning at the terrible signal dropout in the astronauts' MRI scans. I only saw Levi once, in public, and the one interaction we were able to sneak was his hand briefly brushing my lower back. Yikes, right?

It was the best day of my life.

Unlike today. Today's going to be the *worst* day of my life. It's 8:43 a.m., and I already know it.

"Are you actually going to do this?" Reike asks, staring at the "#FAIRGRADUATEADMISSIONS RACE, START LINE" banner above our heads.

"My heart says no."

"And your body?"

"My body also says no. But louder."

She nods, unsurprised. “You can probably do it. The 5K, I mean. For the love of the goddess, do not attempt the half marathon.”

“That’s a lot of trust from someone who has my same wimpy constitution and should know better.”

“It has nothing to do with constitution and everything to do with Levi training you for . . . it’s been what, eight months?”

“Eight months too long.”

We exchange a glance, laughing at each other. I love having Reike here. I love that she and Levi arranged her visit behind my back and surprised me with it. I love her nagging us because we have only vegan food in the house and she’s “sick of competing with the cats for a meager slice of chicken breast!” I love that she’s hooking up with nose-tongue dude while she’s here. I love her. I love all of this.

“Are *you* going to do the race?” I ask.

“Yeah. It’s for a good cause. Not that I fully understand what a Ph.D. is, what graduate admissions are, or even why someone would voluntarily go to school, but if you say you’re helping traditionally underrepresented groups, I’m on board. Rocío and I will walk and chat. She’s planning to talk to me about yet-uncaught serial killers.”

“Lovely.”

“Isn’t she? I cannot believe you let her move back to Baltimore.”

“I know, but she got into her dream school, has an apartment with her dream girlfriend, and I’m pretty sure she’s a leader in the local Wiccan community. I’m just glad she and Kaylee managed to be here for the 5K after putting so much effort into organizing it.”

A young woman walks up to Reike with a smile. “Excuse me—Dr. Königswasser?”

“Oh”—she points at me with her thumb—“not quite the Königswasser you’re looking for.”

“Yep, this is actually my evil twin. I’m Bee.”

“Kate. I’m a psychology grad at UMN.” She shakes my hand enthusiastically. “I’ve been following @WhatWouldMarieDo for years, and I just wanted to say how cool this is.” She gestures around herself. Three

thousand people signed up for the 5K, but it feels like three million showed up—perhaps because it turned into a grad school fair of sorts. The organizing committee decided to allow universities that pledged to guarantee a fair, holistic admission process the opportunity to set up stands to recruit at the finishing lines. I glance at the crowd, spotting Annie and waving at her. We went out for dinner last night, since she flew in for the race a day early. It's not *not* strange, having a meal with your former best friend who once broke your heart, but we're slowly mending things. Plus, she helped out a lot with the logistics of the 5K.

I always thought that revealing my identity would ruin the fun of running WWMD for me, and I was frustrated when Guy's actions made it impossible for me to do otherwise. Remember when I said that I was scared of being doxxed by creeps who look back wistfully to Gamergate? Well, that happened. A little bit. There was some unpleasantness as the news spread and I went public—some awkwardness, a period of adjustment. But one day Rocío called and said, "I always suspected that deep down you were cool, but I figured it was just wishful thinking. Instead, look at you!" That's when I knew everything would be all right. And with time, it was. Being old news is such a relief.

"Thank you so much for coming all the way from Minnesota, Kate."

"You flew in, too, right? From Maryland?"

"I actually live here now. In Houston. Left NIH for NASA last year."

BLINK's demonstration was a resounding success. Well, the first was a resounding disaster. But the second one went so well, got so much positive attention—likely *because* of the botched first attempt and the publicity it generated—that Levi and I ended up having our pick of jobs. You know how I thought I'd end up living in an underpass with a pile of angry spiders? A month later I was offered Trevor's job. And when I declined, Trevor's boss's position. That's life in academia, I guess: the agony and the ecstasy. Ebbs and flows. Did I fantasize about taking the job and forcing Trevor to write me a report on how men are stupider because their brains have lower neural densities? Often. And with almost sexual pleasure.

In the end, Levi and I considered NIH. We considered NASA. We considered quitting, building a lab in a retrofitted shed, Curie-style, and going rogue. We considered faculty positions. We considered Europe. We considered industry. We considered so much, we were doing nothing but considering for a while. (And having sex. And rewatching *The Empire Strikes Back*, about once a week.) In the end, we always came back to NASA. Maybe just because we have good memories here. Because deep down, we like the weather. Because we truly enjoy annoying Boris. Because the hummingbirds rely on us for their mint.

Or because, as Levi said one night on the porch, my head in his lap as we looked at the stars, "This house is in a really good school district." He only briefly met my eyes, and I'm 74 percent sure he was blushing, but we formally accepted NASA's offers the following day. Which means that now I have my permanent lab, right next to his. A year ago, it would have been a nightmare. Funny how these things go, huh?

The two-minute warning whistles, and people start trickling to the start line. A large hand wraps around mine and pulls me toward the crowd.

"Did you come get her because you know that otherwise she'll run away?" Reike asks.

Levi smiles. "Oh, she wouldn't run. More like a brisk walk."

I sigh. "I thought I'd successfully left you behind."

"The pink hair gave you away."

"I don't think I can do this."

"I'm fully aware."

"The longest I've run so far is . . . less than 5K."

"You can start walking anytime." His hand pushes against my lower back, where my newest tattoo resides. Just the outline of Levi's house, with two little kitties inside. "Give it a try."

"You're not going to slow down your pace to match mine, are you?"

"Of course I am."

I roll my eyes. "I always knew you hated me." I grin up at him. When he smiles back, my heart picks up.

I love you, I think. *And you are my home*.

Someone blows one long whistle. I look ahead, take a deep breath, and start running.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

This book is my hate letter to standardized testing. It's also my love letter to neuroscience, Star Wars, women in STEM, friendships that hit rough patches but then try their best to bounce back, research assistants, interdisciplinary scientific collaborations, Elle Woods, ShitAcademicsSay, mermaids, hummingbird feeders, people who struggle with working out, and cats. But let's focus on the hate part!

I remember studying for the GRE about ten years ago, when I was applying for Ph.D. programs, and constantly feeling like I was a total idiot (which I probably am, but for other reasons). I also remember being really angry and really frustrated at the amount of money, time, and energy I had to pour into learning how to calculate when exactly two trains leaving from different stations will meet, especially when I could have used that time to read up on something that was actually relevant to my field. (Or to sleep. Let's be real, I would have probably just taken a nap.)

This book is, of course, fictional, but everything Kaylee says about the GRE is true, and tests like the GRE and the SATs are not only very sketchy when it comes to predicting future academic performance, but they traditionally favor people who come from economically advantaged backgrounds. Access to higher education is, as a rule, scarcer for those who aren't traditionally privileged, and standardized testing only contributes to the problem. But in the last few years there has been a shift, with more and

more institutions and graduate programs not requiring these tests for admission, and that's a fantastic step in the right direction.

Thank you for coming to my TED Talk, and remember: if academia ever makes you feel like you're not good or smart enough . . . it's not you, it's academia.

Love,
Ali

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Publishing has very weird, very long timelines, which means that I'm writing the acknowledgments for my second book in October 2021, right after the publication of my first, and my heart is very full. Every good thing that has happened after the release of *The Love Hypothesis* I owe to my team at Berkley: Sarah Blumenstock, the best editor in the multiverse (who lets me add sex scenes till the very last minute!); Jess Brock, my fantastic publicist; Bridget O'Toole, my incredible marketer; and, of course, my most beloved agent, Thao Le, who brought me to them. Let's be real: publishing is terrifying. But the constant support, hard work, and talent of these four women made it slightly less so. Plus, through them, I got to work with the best publisher in the world. Basically: to every single person at Berkley and at SDLA who helped with my books in any capacity, thank you, thank you, THANK YOU. I'm sorry I always turn in stuff at 11:58 p.m. on deadline days. I'm sorry I ask the same questions forty times. I'm sorry I keep abusing the caps lock. I swear I'm trying to be better!! Special thanks to Penguin Creative (in particular Dana Mendelson) and to Lilith, the cover artist of my wildest dreams. And, of course, thank you to Jessica Clare, Elizabeth Everett, Christina Lauren, and Mariana Zapata for blurbing my first book (asking for blurbs is pants-crappingly scary, guys) and for the constant encouragement.

Love on the Brain wouldn't be what it is without the feedback of the brilliant Claire, Julie Soto, Lindsey Merril, Kat, Stephanie, Jordan, and, of

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And last but very much not least: thanks to Lucy, for being the father I didn't know I needed, and to Jen, for holding my hand during the highs and the lows. Everybody needs a Jen, but mine is taken.

(Oh, and thanks to Stefan, I guess. But only a little.)

Photo courtesy of the author

ALI HAZELWOOD is the *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Love Hypothesis*, as well as the writer of peer-reviewed articles about brain science, in which no one makes out and the ever after is not always happy. Originally from Italy, she lived in Germany and Japan before moving to the US to pursue a Ph.D. in neuroscience. She recently became a professor, which absolutely terrifies her. When Ali is not at work, she can be found running, eating cake pops, or watching sci-fi movies with her two feline overlords (and her slightly-less-feline husband).

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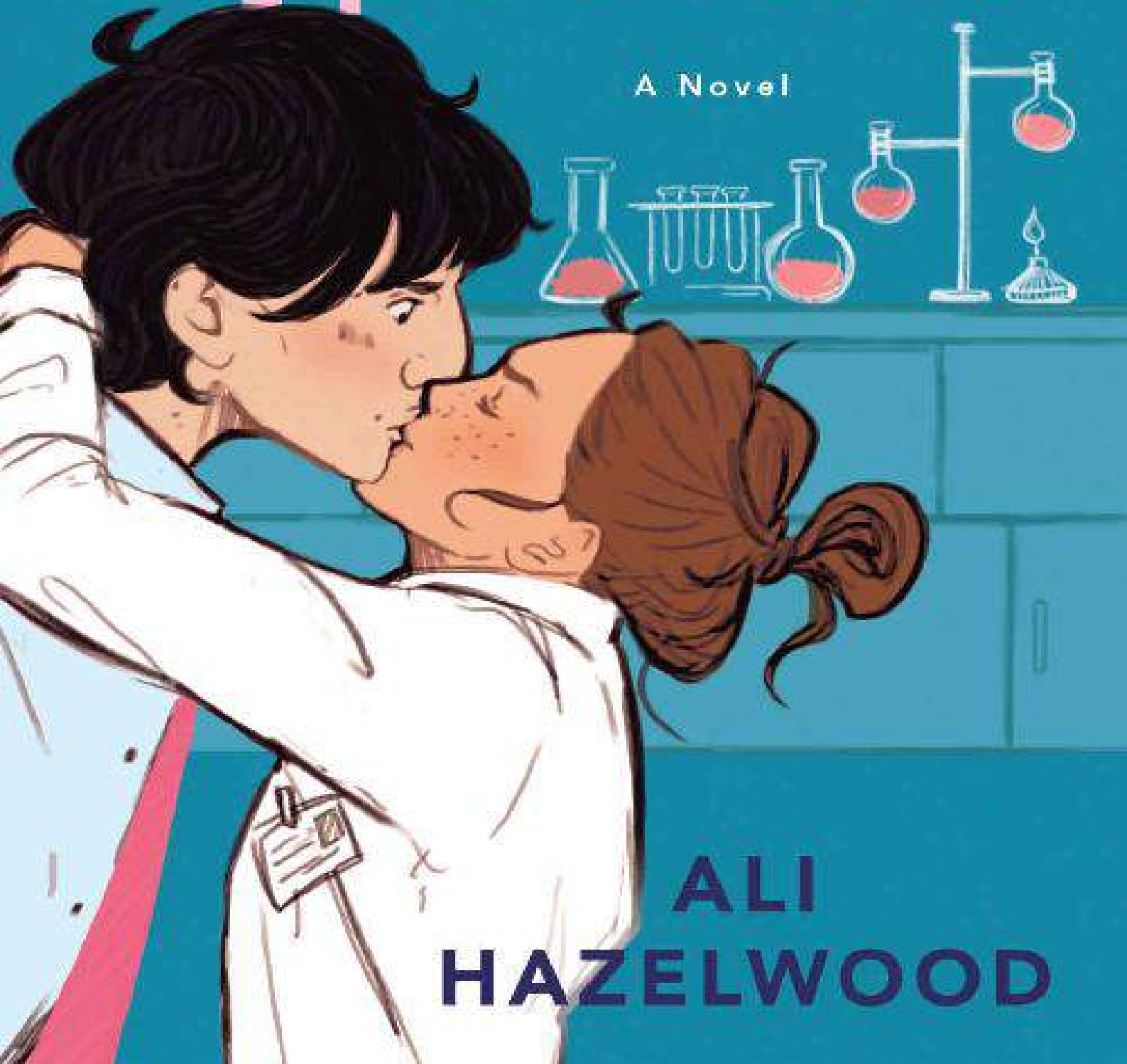
the Love Hypothesis

A Novel



ALI HAZELWOOD

Praise for *The Love Hypothesis*

"Contemporary romance's unicorn: the elusive marriage of deeply brainy and delightfully escapist. . . . *The Love Hypothesis* has wild commercial appeal, but the quieter secret is that there is a specific audience, made up of all of the Olives in the world, who have deeply, ardently waited for this exact book."

—*New York Times* bestselling author Christina Lauren

"Funny, sexy, and smart. Ali Hazelwood did a terrific job with *The Love Hypothesis*."

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"This tackles one of my favorite tropes—Grumpy meets Sunshine—in a fun and utterly endearing way. . . . I loved the nods toward fandom and romance novels, and I couldn't put it down. Highly recommended!"

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"A beautifully written romantic comedy with a heroine you will instantly fall in love with, *The Love Hypothesis* is destined to earn a place on your keeper shelf."

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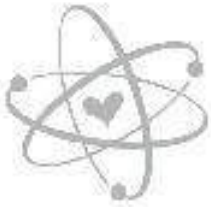
the Love Hypothesis



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To my women in STEM: Kate, Caitie, Hatun, and Mar.
Per aspera ad aspera.

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Excerpt from LOVE ON THE BRAIN

About the Author

hy·poth·e·sis (noun)

A supposition or proposed explanation made on the basis of limited evidence, as a starting point for further investigation.

Example: “Based on the available information and the data hitherto collected, my hypothesis is that the farther away I stay from love, the better off I will be.”

prologue

Frankly, Olive was a bit on the fence about this whole grad school thing.

Not because she didn't like science. (She did. She *loved* science. Science was her *thing*.) And not because of the truckload of obvious red flags. She was well aware that committing to years of unappreciated, underpaid eighty-hour workweeks might *not* be good for her mental health. That nights spent toiling away in front of a Bunsen burner to uncover a trivial slice of knowledge might *not* be the key to happiness. That devoting her mind and body to academic pursuits with only infrequent breaks to steal unattended bagels might *not* be a wise choice.

She was well aware, and yet none of it worried her. Or maybe it did, a tiny bit, but she could deal. It was something else that held her back from surrendering herself to the most notorious and soul-sucking circle of hell (i.e., a Ph.D. program). Held her back, that is, until she was invited to interview for a spot in Stanford's biology department, and came across The Guy.

The Guy whose name she never really got.

The Guy she met after stumbling blindly into the first bathroom she could find.

The Guy who asked her, "Out of curiosity, is there a specific reason you're crying in my restroom?"

Olive squeaked. She tried to open her eyes through the tears and only barely managed to. Her entire field of view was blurry. All she could see was a watery outline—someone tall, dark haired, dressed in black, and . . . yeah. That was it.

"I . . . is this the ladies' restroom?" she stammered.

A pause. Silence. And then: "Nope." His voice was deep. So deep. Really deep. *Dreamy* deep.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"Really?"

"Fairly, since this is my lab's bathroom."

Well. He had her there. "I'm so sorry. Do you need to . . ." She gestured toward the stall, or where she thought the stalls were. Her eyes stung, even closed, and she had to scrunch them shut to dull the burn. She tried to dry her cheeks with her sleeve, but the material of her wrap dress was cheap and flimsy, not half as absorbent as real cotton. Ah, the joys of being impoverished.

"I just need to pour this reagent down the drain," he said, but she didn't hear him move. Maybe because she was blocking the sink. Or maybe because he thought Olive was a weirdo and was contemplating siccing the campus police on her. That would put a brutally quick end to her Ph.D. dreams, wouldn't it? "We don't use this as a restroom, just to dispose of waste and wash equipment."

"Oh, sorry. I thought . . ." Poorly. She'd thought poorly, as was her habit and curse.

"Are you okay?" He must be really tall. His voice sounded like it came from ten feet above her.

"Sure. Why do you ask?"

"Because you are crying. In my bathroom."

“Oh, I’m not crying. Well, I sort of am, but it’s just tears, you know?”

“I do not.”

She sighed, slumping against the tiled wall. “It’s my contacts. They expired some time ago, and they were never that great to begin with. They messed up my eyes. I’ve taken them off, but . . .” She shrugged. Hopefully in his direction. “It takes a while, before they get better.”

“You put in expired contacts?” He sounded personally offended.

“Just a little expired.”

“What’s ‘a little’?”

“I don’t know. A few years?”

“*What?*” His consonants were sharp and precise. Crisp. Pleasant.

“Only just a couple, I think.”

“Just a couple of *years*?”

“It’s okay. Expiration dates are for the weak.”

A sharp sound—some kind of snort. “Expiration dates are so I don’t find you weeping in the corner of my bathroom.”

Unless this dude was Mr. Stanford himself, he really needed to stop calling this *his* bathroom.

“It’s fine.” She waved a hand. She’d have rolled her eyes, if they hadn’t been on fire. “The burning usually lasts only a few minutes.”

“You mean you’ve done this before?”

She frowned. “Done what?”

“Put in expired contacts.”

“Of course. Contacts are not cheap.”

“Neither are *eyes*.”

Humph. Good point. “Hey, have we met? Maybe last night, at the recruitment dinner with prospective Ph.D. students?”

“No.”

“You weren’t there?”

“Not really my scene.”

“But the free food?”

“Not worth the small talk.”

Maybe he was on a diet, because what kind of Ph.D. student said that? And Olive was *sure* that he was a Ph.D. student—the haughty, condescending tone was a dead giveaway. All Ph.D. students were like that: thinking they were better than everyone else just because they had the dubious privilege of slaughtering fruit flies in the name of science for ninety cents an hour. In the grim, dark hellscape of academia, graduate students were the lowliest of creatures and therefore had to convince themselves that they were the best. Olive was no clinical psychologist, but it seemed like a pretty textbook defense mechanism.

“Are you interviewing for a spot in the program?” he asked.

“Yup. For next year’s biology cohort.” God, her eyes were burning. “What about you?” she asked, pressing her palms into them.

“Me?”

“How long have you been here?”

“Here?” A pause. “Six years. Give or take.”

“Oh. Are you graduating soon, then?”

“I . . .”

She picked up on his hesitation and instantly felt guilty. “Wait, you don’t have to tell me. First rule of grad school—don’t ask about other grads’ dissertation timeline.”

A beat. And then another. “Right.”

“Sorry.” She wished she could see him. Social interactions were hard enough to begin with; the last thing she needed was fewer cues to go by. “I didn’t mean to channel your parents at Thanksgiving.”

He laughed softly. “You could never.”

“Oh.” She smiled. “Annoying parents?”

“And even worse Thanksgivings.”

“That’s what you Americans get for leaving the Commonwealth.” She held out her hand in what she hoped was his general direction. “I’m Olive, by the way. Like the tree.” She was starting to wonder whether she’d just introduced herself to the drain disposal when she heard him step closer. The hand that closed around hers was dry, and warm, and so large it could have enveloped her whole fist. Everything about him must be huge. Height, fingers, voice.

It was not entirely unpleasant.

“You’re not American?” he asked.

“Canadian. Listen, if you happen to talk with anyone who’s on the admissions committee, would you mind not mentioning my contacts mishap? It might make me seem like a less-than-stellar applicant.”

“You think so?” he deadpanned.

She would have glared at him if she could. Though maybe she was doing a decent job of it anyway, because he laughed—just a huff, but Olive could tell. And she kind of liked it.

He let go of her, and she realized that she’d been gripping his hand. Oops.

"Are you planning to enroll?" he asked.

She shrugged. "I might not get an offer." But she and the professor she'd interviewed with, Dr. Aslan, had really hit it off. Olive had stuttered and mumbled much less than usual. Plus, her GRE scores and GPA were almost perfect. Not having a life came in handy, sometimes.

"Are you planning to enroll if you get an offer, then?"

She'd be stupid not to. This was Stanford, after all—one of the best biology programs. Or at least, that was what Olive had been telling herself to cover the petrifying truth.

Which was that, frankly, she was a bit on the fence about this whole grad school thing.

"I . . . maybe. I must say, the line between excellent career choice and critical life screwup is getting a bit blurry."

"Seems like you're leaning toward screwup." He sounded like he was smiling.

"No. Well . . . I just . . ."

"You just?"

She bit her lip. "What if I'm not good enough?" she blurted out, and why, God, *why* was she baring the deepest fears of her secret little heart to this random bathroom guy? And what was the point, anyway? Every time she aired out her doubts to friends and acquaintances, they all automatically offered the same trite, meaningless encouragements. *You'll be fine. You can do it. I believe in you.* This guy was surely going to do the same.

Coming up.

Any moment now.

Any second—

"Why do you want to do it?"

Uh? “Do . . . what?”

“Get a Ph.D. What’s your reason?”

Olive cleared her throat. “I’ve always had an inquisitive mind, and graduate school is the ideal environment to foster that. It’ll give me important transferable skills—”

He snorted.

She frowned. “What?”

“Not the line you found in an interview prep book. Why do *you* want a Ph.D.?”

“It’s true,” she insisted, a bit weakly. “I want to sharpen my research abilities—”

“Is it because you don’t know what else to do?”

“No.”

“Because you didn’t get an industry position?”

“No—I didn’t even apply for industry.”

“Ah.” He moved, a large, blurry figure stepping next to her to pour something down the sink. Olive could smell a whiff of eugenol, and laundry detergent, and clean, male skin. An oddly nice combination.

“I need more freedom than industry can offer.”

“You won’t have much freedom in academia.” His voice was closer, like he hadn’t stepped back yet. “You’ll have to fund your work through ludicrously competitive research grants. You’d make better money in a nine-to-five job that actually allows you to entertain the concept of weekends.”

Olive scowled. “Are you trying to get me to decline my offer? Is this some kind of anti–expired-contacts-wearers campaign?”

“Nah.”

She could hear his smile.

“I’ll go ahead and trust that it was just a misstep.”

“I wear them *all the time*, and they almost never—”

“In a long line of missteps, clearly.” He sighed. “Here’s the deal: I have no idea if you’re good enough, but that’s not what you should be asking yourself. Academia’s a lot of bucks for very little bang. What matters is whether your *reason* to be in academia is good enough. So, why the Ph.D., Olive?”

She thought about it, and thought, and thought even more. And then she spoke carefully. “I have a question. A specific research question. Something that I want to find out.” There. Done. This was the answer. “Something I’m afraid no one else will discover if I don’t.”

“A question?”

She felt the air shift and realized that he was now leaning against the sink.

“Yes.” Her mouth felt dry. “Something that’s important to me. And—I don’t trust anyone else to do it. Because they haven’t so far. Because . . .” *Because something bad happened. Because I want to do my part so that it won’t happen again.*

Heavy thoughts to have in the presence of a stranger, in the darkness of her closed eyelids. So she cracked them open; her vision was still blurry, but the burning was mostly gone. The Guy was looking at her. Fuzzy around the edges, perhaps, but so very *there*, waiting patiently for her to continue.

“It’s important to me,” she repeated. “The research that I want to do.” Olive was twenty-three and alone in the world. She didn’t want weekends, or a decent salary. She wanted to go back in time. She wanted to be less lonely. But since that was impossible, she’d settle for fixing what she could.

He nodded but said nothing as he straightened and took a few steps toward the door. Clearly leaving.

“Is mine a good enough reason to go to grad school?” she called after him, hating how eager for approval she sounded. It was possible that she was in the midst of some sort of existential crisis.

He paused and looked back at her. “It’s the best one.”

He was smiling, she thought. Or something like it.

“Good luck on your interview, Olive.”

“Thanks.”

He was almost out the door already.

“Maybe I’ll see you next year,” she babbled, flushing a little. “If I get in. And if you haven’t graduated.”

“Maybe,” she heard him say.

With that, The Guy was gone. And Olive never got his name. But a few weeks later, when the Stanford biology department extended her an offer, she accepted it. Without hesitating.

Chapter One

HYPOTHESIS: *When given a choice between A (a slightly inconveniencing situation) and B (a colossal shitshow with devastating consequences), I will inevitably end up selecting B.*

Two years, eleven months later

In Olive's defense, the man didn't seem to mind the kiss too much.

It did take him a moment to adjust—perfectly understandable, given the sudden circumstances. It was an awkward, uncomfortable, somewhat painful minute, in which Olive was simultaneously smashing her lips against his and pushing herself as high as her toes would extend to keep her mouth at the same level as his face. Did he *have* to be so tall? The kiss must have looked like some clumsy headbutt, and she grew anxious that she was not going to be able to pull the whole thing off. Her friend Anh, whom Olive had spotted coming her way a few seconds ago, was going to take one look at this and know at once that Olive and Kiss Dude couldn't possibly be two people in the middle of a date.

Then that agonizingly slow moment went by, and the kiss became . . . different. The man inhaled sharply and inclined his head a tiny bit, making Olive feel less like a squirrel monkey climbing a baobab tree, and his hands—which were large and pleasantly warm in the AC of the hallway—closed around her waist. They slid up a few inches, coming to wrap around Olive's rib cage and holding her to himself. Not too close, and not too far.

Just so.

It was more of a prolonged peck than anything, but it was quite nice, and for the life span of a few seconds Olive forgot a large number of things, including the fact that she was pressed against a random, unknown dude. That she'd barely had the time to whisper "Can I please kiss you?" before locking lips with him. That what had originally driven her to put on this entire show was the hope of fooling Anh, her best friend in the whole world.

But a good kiss will do that: make a girl forget herself for a while. Olive found herself melting into a broad, solid chest that showed absolutely no give. Her hands traveled from a defined jaw into surprisingly thick and soft hair, and then— then she heard herself sigh, as if already out of breath, and that's when it hit her like a brick on the head, the realization that— No. No.

Nope, nope, *no*.

She should not be enjoying this. Random dude, and all that.

Olive gasped and pushed herself away from him, frantically looking for Anh. In the 11:00 p.m. bluish glow of the biology labs' hallway, her friend was nowhere to be seen. Weird. Olive was sure she had spotted her a few seconds earlier.

Kiss Dude, on the other hand, was standing right in front of her, lips parted, chest rising and a weird light flickering in his eyes, which was exactly when it dawned on her, the enormity of what she had just done. Of *who* she had just—

Fuck her life.

Fuck. Her. Life.

Because Dr. Adam Carlsen was a known ass.

This fact was not remarkable in and of itself, as in academia every position above the graduate student level (Olive's level, sadly) required some degree of assness in order

to be held for any length of time, with tenured faculty at the very peak of the ass pyramid. Dr. Carlsen, though—he was exceptional. At least if the rumors were anything to go by.

He was the reason Olive's roommate, Malcolm, had to completely scrap two research projects and would likely end up graduating a year late; the one who had made Jeremy throw up from anxiety before his qualifying exams; the sole culprit for half the students in the department being forced to postpone their thesis defenses. Joe, who used to be in Olive's cohort and would take her to watch out-of-focus European movies with microscopic subtitles every Thursday night, had been a research assistant in Carlsen's lab, but he'd decided to drop out six months into it for "reasons." It was probably for the best, since most of Carlsen's remaining graduate assistants had perennially shaky hands and often looked like they hadn't slept in a year.

Dr. Carlsen might have been a young academic rock star and biology's wunderkind, but he was also mean and hypercritical, and it was obvious in the way he spoke, in the way he carried himself, that he thought himself the only person doing decent science within the Stanford biology department. Within the entire world, probably. He was a notoriously moody, obnoxious, terrifying dick.

And Olive had just kissed him.

She wasn't sure how long the silence lasted—only that he was the one to break it. He stood in front of Olive, ridiculously intimidating with dark eyes and even darker hair, staring down from who knows how many inches above six feet—he must have been over half a foot taller than she was. He scowled, an expression that she recognized from seeing him attend the departmental seminar, a look that usually preceded him raising his hand to point out some perceived fatal flaw in the speaker's work.

Adam Carlsen. Destroyer of research careers, Olive had once overheard her adviser say.

It's okay. It's fine. Totally fine. She was just going to pretend nothing had happened, nod at him politely, and tiptoe her way out of here. *Yes, solid plan.*

"Did you . . . Did you just kiss me?" He sounded puzzled, and maybe a little out of breath. His lips were full and plump and . . . God. Kissed. There was simply no way Olive could get away with denying what she had just done.

Still, it was worth a try.

"Nope."

Surprisingly, it seemed to work.

"Ah. Okay, then." Carlsen nodded and turned around, looking vaguely disoriented. He took a couple of steps down the hallway, reached the water fountain—maybe where he'd been headed in the first place.

Olive was starting to believe that she might actually be off the hook when he halted and turned back with a skeptical expression.

"Are you sure?"

Dammit.

"I—" She buried her face in her hands. "It's not the way it looks."

"Okay. I . . . Okay," he repeated slowly. His voice was deep and low and sounded a lot like he was on his way to getting mad. Like maybe he was already mad. "What's going on here?"

There was simply no way to explain this. Any normal person would have found Olive's situation odd, but Adam Carlsen, who obviously considered empathy a bug and not a

feature of humanity, could never understand. She let her hands fall to her sides and took a deep breath.

"I . . . listen, I don't mean to be rude, but this is really none of your business."

He stared at her for a moment, and then he nodded. "Yes. Of course." He must be getting back into his usual groove, because his tone had lost some of its surprise and was back to normal—dry. Laconic. "I'll just go back to my office and begin to work on my Title IX complaint."

Olive exhaled in relief. "Yeah. That would be great, since — Wait. Your what?"

He cocked his head. "Title IX is a federal law that protects against sexual misconduct within academic settings—"

"I know what Title IX is."

"I see. So you willfully chose to disregard it."

"I— What? No. No, I didn't!"

He shrugged. "I must be mistaken, then. Someone else must have assaulted me."

"Assault—I didn't 'assault' you."

"You did kiss me."

"But not *really*."

"Without first securing my consent."

"I *asked* if I could kiss you!"

"And then did so without waiting for my response."

"What? You said yes."

"Excuse me?"

She frowned. "I asked if I could kiss you, and you said yes."

“Incorrect. You asked if you could kiss me and I snorted.”

“I’m *pretty sure* I heard you said yes.”

He lifted one eyebrow, and for a minute Olive let herself daydream of drowning someone. Dr. Carlsen. Herself. Both sounded like great options.

“Listen, I’m really sorry. It was a weird situation. Can we just forget that this happened?”

He studied her for a long moment, his angular face serious and something else, something that she couldn’t quite decipher because she was too busy noticing all over again how damn towering and broad he was. Just massive. Olive had always been slight, just this side of too slender, but girls who are five eight rarely felt diminutive. At least until they found themselves standing next to Adam Carlsen. She’d known that he was tall, of course, from seeing him around the department or walking across campus, from sharing the elevator with him, but they’d never interacted. Never been this close.

Except for a second ago, Olive. When you almost put your tongue in his—

“Is there something wrong?” He sounded almost concerned.

“What? No. No, there isn’t.”

“Because,” he continued calmly, “kissing a stranger at midnight in a science lab might be a sign that there is.”

“There isn’t.”

Carlsen nodded, thoughtful. “Very well. Expect mail in the next few days, then.” He began to walk past her, and she turned to yell after him.

“You didn’t even ask my name!”

“I’m sure anyone could figure it out, since you must have swiped your badge to get in the labs area after hours. Have a

good night."

"Wait!" She leaned forward and stopped him with a hand on his wrist. He paused immediately, even though it was obvious that it would take him no effort to free himself, and stared pointedly at the spot where her fingers had wrapped around his skin—right below a wristwatch that probably cost half her yearly graduate salary. Or all of it.

She let go of him at once and took one step back. "Sorry, I didn't mean to—"

"The kiss. Explain."

Olive bit into her lower lip. She had truly screwed herself over. She had to tell him, now. "Anh Pham." She looked around to make sure Anh was really gone. "The girl who was passing by. She's a graduate student in the biology department."

Carlsen gave no indication of knowing who Anh was.

"Anh has . . ." Olive pushed a strand of brown hair behind her ear. This was where the story became embarrassing. Complicated, and a little juvenile sounding. "I was seeing this guy in the department. Jeremy Langley, he has red hair and works with Dr. . . . Anyway, we went out just a couple of times, and then I brought him to Anh's birthday party, and they just sort of hit it off and—"

Olive shut her eyes. Which was probably a bad idea, because now she could see it painted on her lids, how her best friend and her date had bantered in that bowling alley, as if they'd known each other their whole lives; the never-exhausted topics of conversation, the laughter, and then, at the end of the night, Jeremy following Anh's every move with his gaze. It had been painfully clear who he was interested in. Olive waved a hand and tried for a smile.

“Long story short, after Jeremy and I ended things he asked Anh out. She said no because of . . . girl code and all that, but I can tell that she *really* likes him. She’s afraid to hurt my feelings, and no matter how many times I told her it was fine she wouldn’t believe me.”

Not to mention that the other day I overheard her confess to our friend Malcolm that she thought Jeremy was awesome, but she could never betray me by going out with him, and she sounded so dejected. Disappointed and insecure, not at all like the spunky, larger-than-life Anh I am used to.

“So I just lied and told her that I was already dating someone else. Because she’s one of my closest friends and I’d never seen her like a guy this much and I want her to have the good things she deserves and I’m positive that she would do the same for me and—” Olive realized that she was rambling and that Carlsen couldn’t have cared less. She stopped and swallowed, even though her mouth felt dry. “Tonight. I told her I’d be on a date *tonight*.”

“Ah.” His expression was unreadable.

“But I’m not. So I decided to come in to work on an experiment, but Anh showed up, too. She wasn’t supposed to be here. But she was. Coming this way. And I panicked—well.” Olive wiped a hand down her face. “I didn’t really think.”

Carlsen didn’t say anything, but it was there in his eyes that he was thinking, *Obviously*.

“I just needed her to believe that I was on a date.”

He nodded. “So you kissed the first person you saw in the hallway. Perfectly logical.”

Olive winced. “When you put it like that, perhaps it wasn’t my best moment.”

“Perhaps.”

“But it wasn’t my worst, either! I’m pretty sure Anh saw us. Now she’ll think that I was on a date with you and she’ll hopefully feel free to go out with Jeremy and—” She shook her head. “Listen. I’m so, so sorry about the kiss.”

“Are you?”

“Please, don’t report me. I really thought I heard you say yes. I promise I didn’t mean to . . .”

Suddenly, the enormity of what she had just done fully dawned on her. She had just kissed a random guy, a guy who happened to be the most notoriously unpleasant faculty member in the biology department. She’d misunderstood a *snort* for consent, she’d basically attacked him in the hallway, and now he was staring at her in that odd, pensive way, so large and focused and close to her, and . . .

Shit.

Maybe it was the late night. Maybe it was that her last coffee had been sixteen hours ago. Maybe it was Adam Carlsen looking down at her, like *that*. All of a sudden, this entire situation was just too much.

“Actually, you’re absolutely right. And I am so sorry. If you felt in any way harassed by me, you really should report me, because it’s only fair. It was a horrible thing to do, though I really didn’t want to . . . Not that my intentions matter; it’s more like your perception of . . .”

Crap, crap, crap.

“I’m going to leave now, okay? Thank you, and . . . I am so, so, *so* sorry.” Olive spun around on her heels and ran away down the hallway.

“Olive,” she heard him call after her. “Olive, wait—”

She didn’t stop. She sprinted down the stairs to the first floor and then out the building and across the pathways of the

sparsely lit Stanford campus, running past a girl walking her dog and a group of students laughing in front of the library. She continued until she was standing in front of her apartment's door, stopping only to unlock it, making a beeline for her room in the hope of avoiding her roommate and whoever he might have brought home tonight.

It wasn't until she slumped on her bed, staring at the glow-in-the-dark stars glued to her ceiling, that she realized she had neglected to check on her lab mice. She had also left her laptop on her bench and her sweatshirt somewhere in the lab, and she had completely forgotten to stop at the store and buy the coffee she'd promised Malcolm she'd get for tomorrow morning.

Shit. What a disaster of a day.

It never occurred to Olive that Dr. Adam Carlsen—known ass—had called her by her name.

Chapter Two

HYPOTHESIS: *Any rumor regarding my love life will spread with a speed that is directly proportional to my desire to keep said rumor a secret.*

Olive Smith was a rising third-year Ph.D. student in one of the best biology departments in the country, one that housed more than one hundred grads and what often felt like several million majoring undergrads. She had no idea what the exact number of faculty was, but judging from the mailboxes in the copy room she'd say that a safe guess was: too many. Therefore, she reasoned that if she'd never had the misfortune of interacting with Adam Carlsen in the two years before The Night (it had been only a handful of days since the kissing incident, but Olive already knew that she'd think of last Friday as The Night for the rest of her life), it was entirely possible that she might be able to finish grad school without crossing paths with him ever again. In fact, she was fairly sure that not only did Adam Carlsen have no idea who she was, but he also had no desire to learn—and had probably already forgotten all about what happened.

Unless, of course, she was catastrophically wrong and he did end up filing a Title IX lawsuit. In which case she supposed that she *would* see him again, when she pleaded guilty in federal court.

Olive figured that she could waste her time fretting about legal fees, or she could focus on what were more pressing issues. Like the approximately five hundred slides she had to prepare for the neurobiology class that she was slated to TA in the fall semester, which was starting in less than two weeks.

Or the note Malcolm had left this morning, telling her he'd seen a cockroach scurry under the credenza even though their apartment was already full of traps. Or the most crucial one: the fact that her research project had reached a critical point and she desperately needed to find a bigger, significantly richer lab to carry out her experiment. Otherwise, what could very well become a groundbreaking, clinically relevant study might end up languishing on a handful of petri dishes stacked in the crisper drawer of her fridge.

Olive opened her laptop with half a mind to google "Organs one can live without" and "How much cash for them" but got sidetracked by the twenty new emails she'd received while busy with her lab animals. They were almost exclusively from predatory journals, Nigerian prince wannabes, and one glitter company whose newsletter she'd signed up for six years ago to get a free tube of lipstick. Olive quickly marked them as read, eager to go back to her experiments, and then noticed that one message was actually a reply to something she had sent. A reply from . . . Holy crap. *Holy crap.*

She clicked on it so hard she almost sprained her pointer finger.

Today, 3:15 p.m.

FROM: Tom-Benton@harvard.edu

TO: Olive-Smith@stanford.edu

SUBJECT: Re: Pancreatic Cancer Screening Project

Olive,

Your project sounds good. I'll be visiting Stanford in about two weeks. Why don't we chat then?

Cheers,

TB

Tom Benton, Ph.D.

Associate Professor

Department of Biological Sciences, Harvard University

Her heart skipped a beat. Then it started galloping. Then it slowed down to a crawl. And then she felt her blood pulsate in her eyelids, which couldn't be healthy, but— *Yes*. Yes! She had a taker. Almost. Probably? Maybe. Definitely maybe. Tom Benton had said "good." He had said that it sounded "good." It had to be a "good" sign, right?

She frowned, scrolling down to reread the email she'd sent him several weeks earlier.

July 7, 8:19 a.m.

FROM: Olive-Smith@stanford.edu

TO: Tom-Benton@harvard.edu

SUBJECT: Pancreatic Cancer Screening Project

Dr. Benton,

My name is Olive Smith, and I am a Ph.D. student in the biology department of Stanford University. My research focuses on pancreatic cancer, in particular on finding noninvasive, affordable detection tools that could lead to early treatment and increase survival rates. I have been working on blood biomarkers, with promising results. (You can read about my preliminary work in the peer-reviewed paper I have attached. I have also submitted more recent, unpublished findings to this year's Society for Biological Discovery conference; acceptance is pending but see the attached abstract.) The next step would be to carry out additional studies to determine the feasibility of my test kit.

Unfortunately my current lab (Dr. Aysegul Aslan's, who is retiring in two years) does not have the funding or the equipment to allow me to proceed. She is encouraging me to find a larger cancer research lab where I could spend the next academic year to collect the data I need. Then I would return to Stanford to analyze and write up the data. I am a huge fan of the work you have published on pancreatic cancer, and I was wondering whether there might be a possibility to carry out my work in your lab at Harvard.

I am happy to talk more in detail about my project if you are interested.

Sincerely,

Olive

Olive Smith

Ph.D. Candidate

Biology Department, Stanford University

If Tom Benton, cancer researcher extraordinaire, came to Stanford and gave Olive ten minutes of his time, she could convince him to help her out with her research predicament!

Well . . . maybe.

Olive was much better at actually *doing* research than at selling its importance to others. Science communication and public speaking of any sort were definitely her big weaknesses. But she had a chance to show Benton how promising her results were. She could list the clinical benefits of her work, and she could explain how little she required to turn her project into a huge success. All she needed was a quiet bench in a corner of his lab, a couple hundred of his lab mice, and unlimited access to his twenty-million-dollar electron microscope. Benton wouldn't even notice her.

Olive headed for the break room, mentally writing an impassioned speech on how she was willing to use his facilities only at night and limit her oxygen consumption to less than five breaths per minute. She poured herself a cup of stale coffee and turned around to find someone scowling right behind her.

She startled so hard that she almost burned herself.

"Jesus!" She clutched her chest, took a deep breath, and held tighter onto her Scooby-Doo mug. "Anh. You scared the shit out of me."

"Olive."

It was a bad sign. Anh never called her Olive—never, unless she was reprimanding her for biting her nails to the quick or for having vitamin gummies for dinner.

"Hey! How was your—"

"The other night."

Dammit. "—weekend?"

“Dr. Carlsen.”

Dammit, dammit, dammit. “What about him?”

“I saw the two of you together.”

“Oh. Really?” Olive’s surprise sounded painfully playacted, even to her own ears. Maybe she should have signed up for drama club in high school instead of playing every single sport available.

“Yes. Here, in the department.”

“Oh. Cool. Um, I didn’t see you, or I’d have said hi.”

Anh frowned. “Ol. I saw you. I saw you with Carlsen. You know that I saw you, and I know that you know that I saw you, because you’ve been avoiding me.”

“I have not.”

Anh gave her one of her formidable no-bullshit looks. It was probably the one she used as president of the student senate, as head of the Stanford Women in Science Association, as director of outreach for the Organization of BIPOC Scientists. There was no fight Anh couldn’t win. She was fearsome and indomitable, and Olive loved this about her—but not right now.

“You haven’t answered any of my messages for the past two days. We usually text every hour.”

They did. Multiple times. Olive switched the mug to her left hand, for no reason other than to buy some time. “I’ve been . . . busy?”

“Busy?” Anh’s eyebrow shot up. “Busy kissing Carlsen?”

“Oh. Oh, *that*. That was just . . .”

Anh nodded, as if to encourage her to finish the sentence. When it became obvious that Olive couldn’t, Anh continued for her.

“That was—no offense, Ol—but that was the most bizarre kiss I have ever seen.”

Calm. Stay calm. She doesn’t know. She cannot know. “I doubt that,” Olive retorted weakly. “Take that upside-down Spider-Man kiss. That was way more bizarre than—”

“Ol, you said you were on a date that night. You’re not dating *Carlsen*, are you?” She twisted her face in a grimace.

It would have been so easy to confess the truth. Since starting grad school Anh and Olive had done heaps of moronic things, together and separately; the time Olive panicked and kissed none other than Adam Carlsen could become one of them, one they laughed about during their weekly beer-and-s’mores nights.

Or not. There was a chance that if Olive admitted to lying now, Anh might never trust her again. Or that she’d never go out with Jeremy. And as much as the idea of her best friend dating her ex had Olive wanting to puke just a bit, the thought of said best friend being anything but happy had her wanting to puke a lot more.

The situation was depressingly simple: Olive was alone in the world. She had been for a long time, ever since high school. She had trained herself not to make a big deal out of it—she was sure many people were alone in the world and found themselves having to write down made-up names and phone numbers on their emergency contact forms. During college and her master’s, focusing on science and research had been her way of coping, and she had been perfectly ready to spend the rest of her life holed up in a lab with little more than a beaker and a handful of pipettes as her faithful companions—until . . . Anh.

In a way, it had been love at first sight. First day of grad school. Biology cohort orientation. Olive entered the conference room, looked around, and sat in the first free seat

she could find, petrified. She was the only woman in the room, virtually alone in a sea of white men who were already talking about boats, and whatever sportsball was on TV the night before, and the best routes to drive places. *I have made a terrible mistake*, she thought. *The Guy in the bathroom was wrong. I should never have come here. I am never going to fit in.*

And then a girl with curly dark hair and a pretty, round face plopped in the chair next to hers and muttered, "So much for the STEM programs' commitment to inclusivity, am I right?" That was the moment everything changed.

They could have just been allies. As the only two non-cis-white-male students in their year, they could have found solace together when some bitching was needed and ignored each other otherwise. Olive had lots of friends like that—all of them, actually, circumstantial acquaintances whom she thought of fondly but not very often. Anh, though, had been different from the start. Maybe because they'd soon found out that they loved spending their Saturday nights eating junk food and falling asleep to rom-coms. Maybe it was the way she'd insisted on dragging Olive to every single "women in STEM" support group on campus and had wowed everyone with her bull's-eye comments. Maybe it was that she'd opened up to Olive and explained how hard it had been for her to get where she was today. The way her older brothers had made fun of her and called her a nerd for loving math so much growing up—at an age when being a nerd was not quite considered cool. That time a physics professor asked her if she was in the wrong class on the first day of the semester. The fact that despite her grades and research experience, even her academic adviser had seemed skeptical when she'd decided to pursue STEM higher education.

Olive, whose path to grad school had been rough but not nearly as rough, was befuddled. Then enraged. And then in

absolute awe when she understood the self-doubt that Anh had been able to harness into sheer fierceness.

And for some unimaginable reason, Anh seemed to like Olive just as much. When Olive's stipend hadn't quite stretched to the end of the month, Anh had shared her instant ramen. When Olive's computer had crashed without backups, Anh had stayed up all night to help her rewrite her crystallography paper. When Olive had nowhere to go over the holidays, Anh would bring her friend home to Michigan and let her large family ply Olive with delicious food while rapid Vietnamese flowed around her. When Olive had felt too stupid for the program and had considered dropping out, Anh had talked her out of it.

The day Olive met Anh's rolling eyes, a life-changing friendship was born. Slowly, they'd begun to include Malcolm and become a bit of a trio, but Anh . . . Anh was *her person*. Family. Olive hadn't even thought that was possible for someone like her.

Anh rarely asked anything for herself, and even though they'd been friends for more than two years, Olive had never seen her show interest in dating anyone—until Jeremy. Pretending that she'd been on a date with Carlsen was the least Olive could do to ensure her friend's happiness.

So she bucked up, smiled, and tried to keep her tone reasonably even while asking, "What do you mean?"

"I mean that we talk every minute of every day, and you never mentioned Carlsen before. My closest friend is supposedly seeing the superstar professor of the department, and somehow I've never heard of it? You *know* his reputation, right? Is it some kind of joke? Do you have a brain tumor? Do *I* have a brain tumor?"

This was what happened whenever Olive lied: she ended up having to tell even more lies to cover her first, and she was

horrible at it, which meant that each lie got worse and less convincing than the previous. There was no way she could fool Anh. There was no way she could fool *anybody*. Anh was going to get mad, then Jeremy was going to get mad, then Malcolm, too, and then Olive was going to find herself utterly alone. The heartbreak was going to make her flunk out of grad school. She was going to lose her visa and her only source of income and move back to Canada, where it snowed all the time and people ate moose heart and—

"Hey."

The voice, deep and even, came from somewhere behind Olive, but she didn't need to turn to know that it was Carlsen's. Just like she didn't need to turn to know that the large, warm weight suddenly steadying her, a firm but barely there pressure applied to the center of her lower back, was Carlsen's hand. About two inches above her ass.

Holy crap.

Olive twisted her neck and looked up. And up. And up. And a bit more up. She was not a short woman, but he was just *big*. "Oh. Um, hey."

"Is everything okay?" He said it looking into her eyes, in a low, intimate tone. Like they were alone. Like Anh was not there. He said it in a way that should have made Olive uncomfortable but didn't. For some inexplicable reason his presence in the room soothed her, even though until a second ago she had been freaking out. Perhaps two different types of unease neutralized each other? It sounded like a fascinating research topic. Worth pursuing. Maybe Olive should abandon biology and switch to psychology. Maybe she should excuse herself and go run a literature search. Maybe she should expire on the spot to avoid facing this crapfest of a situation she'd put herself in.

“Yes. Yes. Everything is *great*. Anh and I were just . . . chatting. About our weekends.”

Carlsen looked at Anh, as though realizing for the first time that she was in the room. He acknowledged her existence with one of those brief nods dudes used to greet others. His hand slid lower on Olive’s spine just as Anh’s eyes widened.

“Nice to meet you, Anh. I’ve heard a lot about you,” Carlsen said, and he was good at this, Olive had to admit. Because she was sure that from Anh’s angle it looked like he was groping her, but in fact he was . . . not. Olive could barely feel his hand on her.

Just a little, maybe. The warmth, and the slight pressure, and—

“Nice to meet you, too.” Anh looked thunderstruck. Like she might pass out. “Um, I was just about to leave. Ol, I’m going to text you when . . . yeah.”

She was out of the room before Olive could answer. Which was good, because Olive didn’t need to come up with more lies. But also slightly less good, because now it was just her and Carlsen. Standing way too close. Olive would have paid good money to say that she was the one to put some distance between them, but the embarrassing truth was that it was Carlsen who stepped away first. Enough to give her the space she needed, and then some.

“Is everything okay?” he asked again. His tone was still soft. Not something she would have expected from him.

“Yes. Yes, I just . . .” Olive waved her hand. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

“Did you hear what she said? About Friday and . . .”

“I did. That’s why I . . .” He looked at her, and then at his hand—the one that had been warming her back a few seconds

ago—and Olive immediately understood.

"Thank you," she repeated. Because Adam Carlsen might have been a known ass, but Olive was feeling pretty damn grateful right at the moment. "Also, uh, I couldn't help noticing that no agents from the Federal Bureau of Investigation have knocked on my door to arrest me in the past seventy-two hours."

The corner of his mouth twitched. Minimally. "Is that so?"

Olive nodded. "Which makes me think that maybe you haven't filed that complaint. Even though it would have been totally within your rights. So, thank you. For that. And . . . and for stepping in, right now. You saved me a lot of trouble."

Carlsen stared at her for a long moment, looking suddenly like he did during seminar, when people mixed up theory and hypothesis or admitted to using listwise deletion instead of imputation. "You shouldn't need someone to step in."

Olive stiffened. Right. *Known ass.* "Well, it's not as if I asked you to do anything. I was going to handle it by myse—"

"And you shouldn't have to lie about your relationship status," he continued. "Especially not so that your friend and your boyfriend can get together guilt-free. That's not how friendship works, last I checked."

Oh. So he'd actually been listening when Olive vomited her life story at him. "It's not like that." He lifted an eyebrow, and Olive raised a hand in defense. "Jeremy wasn't really my boyfriend. And Anh didn't ask me for anything. I'm not some sort of victim, I just . . . want my friend to be happy."

"By lying to her," he added drily.

"Well, yeah, but . . . She thinks we're dating, you and I," Olive blurted out. God, the implications were too ridiculous to bear.

“Wasn’t that the point?”

“Yeah.” She nodded and then remembered the coffee in her hand and took a sip from her mug. It was still warm. The conversation with Anh couldn’t have lasted more than five minutes. “Yeah. I guess it was. By the way—I’m Olive Smith. In case you’re still interested in filing that complaint. I’m a Ph.D. student in Dr. Aslan’s lab—”

“I know who you are.”

“Oh.” Maybe he had looked her up, then. Olive tried to imagine him combing through the Current Ph.D. Students’ section on the department website. Olive’s picture had been taken by the program secretary on her third day of grad school, well before she had become fully aware of what she was in for. She had made an effort to look good: tamed her wavy brown hair, put on mascara to pop the green of her eyes, even attempted to hide her freckles with some borrowed foundation. It had been before she’d realized how ruthless, how cutthroat academia could be. Before the sense of inadequacy, before the constant fear that even if she was good at research, she might never be able to truly make it as an academic. She had been smiling. A real, actual smile.

“Okay.”

“I’m Adam. Carlsen. I’m faculty in—”

She burst out laughing in his face. And then regretted it immediately as she noticed his confused expression, as though he’d seriously thought Olive might not know who he was. As though he was unaware of being one of the most prominent scholars in the field. The modesty was not at all like Adam Carlsen. Olive cleared her throat.

“Right. Um, I know who you are, too, Dr. Carlsen.”

“You should probably call me Adam.”

“Oh. Oh, no.” That would be way too . . . No. The department was not like that. Grads didn’t call faculty by their first names. “I could never—”

“If Anh happens to be around.”

“Oh. Yeah.” It made sense. “Thank you. I hadn’t thought of that.” Or of anything else, really. Clearly, her brain had stopped working three days ago, when she’d decided that kissing him to save her own ass was a good idea. “If that’s o-okay with you. I’m going to go home, because this whole thing was kind of stressful and . . .” *I was going to run an experiment, but I really need to sit on the couch and watch* American Ninja Warrior *for forty-five minutes while eating Cool Ranch Doritos, which taste surprisingly better than you’d give them credit for.*

He nodded. “I’ll walk you to your car.”

“I’m not *that* distraught.”

“In case Anh’s still around.”

“Oh.” It was, Olive had to admit, a kind offer. Surprisingly so. Especially because it came from Adam “I’m Too Good for This Department” Carlsen. Olive knew that he was a dick, so she couldn’t quite understand why today he . . . didn’t seem to be one. Maybe she should just blame her own appalling behavior, which would make anyone look good by comparison. “Thanks. But no need.”

She could tell that he didn’t want to insist but couldn’t help himself. “I’d feel better if you let me walk you to your car.”

“I don’t have a car.” *I’m a grad student living in Stanford, California. I make less than thirty thousand dollars a year. My rent takes up two-thirds of my salary. I’ve been wearing the same pair of contacts since May, and I go to every seminar that provides refreshments to save on meals*, she didn’t bother

adding. She had no idea how old Carlsen was, but it couldn't have been that long ago that he was a grad student.

"Do you take the bus?"

"I bike. And my bike is right at the entrance of the building."

He opened his mouth, and then closed it. And then opened it again.

You kissed that mouth, Olive. And it was a good kiss.

"There are no bike lanes around here."

She shrugged. "I like to live dangerously." *Cheaply*, she meant. "And I have a helmet." She turned to set her mug on the first surface she could find. She'd retrieve it later. Or not, if someone stole it. Who cared? She'd gotten it from a postdoc who'd left academia to become a DJ, anyway. For the second time in less than a week, Carlsen had saved her ass. For the second time, she couldn't stand being with him a minute longer.

"I'll see you around, okay?"

His chest rose as he inhaled deeply. "Yeah. Okay."

Olive got out of the room as fast as she could.

"IS IT A prank? It must be a prank. Am I on national TV? Where are the hidden cameras? How do I look?"

"It's not a prank. There are no cameras." Olive adjusted the strap of her backpack on her shoulder and stepped to the side to avoid being run over by an undergrad on an electric scooter. "But now that you mention it—you look great. Especially for seven thirty in the morning."

Anh didn't blush, but it was a close thing. "Last night I did one of those face masks that you and Malcolm got me for my birthday. The one that looks like a panda? And I got a new sunscreen that's supposed to give you a bit of a glow. And I put on mascara," she added hastily under her breath.

Olive could ask her why she'd gone the extra mile to look nice on a run-of-the-mill Tuesday morning, but she already knew the answer: Jeremy's and Anh's labs were on the same floor, and while the biology department was large, chance encounters were very much a possibility.

She hid a smile. As weird as the idea of a best friend dating an ex might sound, she was glad that Anh was starting to allow herself to consider Jeremy romantically. Mostly, it was nice to know that the indignity Olive had put herself through with Carlsen on The Night was paying off. That, together with Tom Benton's very promising email about her research project, had Olive thinking that things might be finally looking up.

"Okay." Anh chewed on her lower lip, deep in concentration. "So it's not a prank. Which means that there must be another explanation. Let me find it."

"There is no explanation to be found. We just—"

"Oh my God, are you trying to get citizenship? Are they deporting you back to Canada because we've been sharing Malcolm's Netflix password? Tell them we didn't know it was a federal crime. No, wait, don't tell them anything until we get you a lawyer. And, Ol, I will marry you. I'll get you a green card and you won't have to—"

"Anh." Olive squeezed her friend's hand tighter to get her to shut up for a second. "I promise you, I'm not getting deported. I just went on a single date with Carlsen."

Anh scrunched her face and dragged Olive to a bench on the side of the path, forcing her to sit down. Olive complied, telling herself that were their positions inverted, had she

caught Anh kissing Adam Carlsen, she'd probably have the same reaction. Hell, she'd probably be busy booking a full-blown psychiatric evaluation for Anh.

"Listen," Anh started, "do you remember last spring, when I held your hair back while you projectile vomited the five pounds of spoiled shrimp cocktail you ate at Dr. Park's retirement party?"

"Oh, yes. I do." Olive cocked her head, pensive. "You ate more than me and never got sick."

"Because I'm made of sterner stuff, but never mind that. The point is: I am here for you, and always will be, no matter what. No matter how many pounds of spoiled shrimp cocktail you projectile vomit, you can trust me. We're a team, you and I. And Malcolm, when he's not busy screwing his way through the Stanford population. So if Carlsen is secretly an extraterrestrial life-form planning a takeover of Earth that will ultimately result in humanity being enslaved by evil overlords who look like cicadas, and the only way to stop him is dating him, you can tell me and I'll inform NASA—"

"For God's sake"—Olive had to laugh—"it was just a date!"

Anh looked pained. "I just don't understand."

Because it doesn't make sense. "I know, but there is nothing to understand. It's just . . . We went on a date."

"But . . . why? Ol, you're beautiful and smart and funny and have excellent taste in knee socks, why would you go out with Adam Carlsen?"

Olive scratched her nose. "Because he is . . ." It cost her, to say the word. Oh, it cost her. But she had to. "Nice."

"Nice?" Anh's eyebrows shot up so high they almost merged with her hairline.

She does look extra cute today, Olive reflected, pleased.

"Adam 'Ass' Carlsen?"

"Well, yeah. He is . . ." Olive looked around, as if help could come from the oak trees, or the undergrads rushing to their summer classes. When it didn't seem forthcoming, she just finished, lamely, "He is a *nice* asshole, I guess."

Anh's expression went straight up disbelieving. "Okay, so you went from dating someone as cool as Jeremy to going out with Adam Carlsen."

Perfect. This was exactly the opening Olive had wanted. "I did. And happily, because I never cared that much about Jeremy." Finally some truth in this conversation. "It wasn't that hard to move on, honestly. Which is why— Please, Anh, put that boy out of his misery. He deserves it, and above all, *you* deserve it. I bet he's on campus today. You should ask him to accompany you to that horror movie festival so I don't have to come with you and sleep with the lights on for the next six months."

This time Anh blushed outright. She looked down at her hands, picked at her fingernails, and *then* she began to fiddle with the hem of her shorts before saying, "I don't know. Maybe. I mean, if you really think that—"

The sound of an alarm went off from Anh's pocket, and she straightened to pull out her phone. "Crap, I've got a Diversity in STEM mentoring meeting and then I have to run two assays." She stood, picking up her backpack. "Want to get together for lunch?"

"Can't. Have a TA meeting." Olive smiled. "Maybe Jeremy's free, though."

Anh rolled her eyes, but the corners of her mouth were curving up. It made Olive more than a little happy. So happy

that she didn't even flip her off when Anh turned around from the path and asked, "Is he blackmailing you?"

"Huh?"

"Carlsen. Is he blackmailing you? Did he find out that you're an aberration and pee in the shower?"

"First of all, it's time efficient." Olive glared. "Second, I find it oddly flattering that you'd think Carlsen would go to these ridiculous lengths to get me to date him."

"Anyone would, Ol. Because you're awesome." Anh grimaced before adding, "Except when you're peeing in the shower."

JEREMY WAS ACTING weird. Which didn't mean much, since Jeremy had always been a bit awkward, and having recently split from Olive to date her best friend was not going to make him any less so—but today he seemed even weirder than usual. He came into the campus coffee shop, a few hours after Olive's conversation with Anh, and proceeded to stare at her for two good minutes. Then three. Then five. It was more attention than he'd ever paid to Olive—yes, including their dates.

When it got borderline ridiculous, she lifted her eyes from her laptop and waved at him. Jeremy flushed, grabbed his latte from the counter, and found a table for himself. Olive went back to rereading her two-line email for the seventieth time.

Today, 10:12 a.m.

FROM: Olive-Smith@stanford.edu

TO: Tom-Benton@harvard.edu

SUBJECT: Re: Pancreatic Cancer Screening Project

Dr. Benton,

Thank you for your response. Chatting in person would be fantastic. What day will you be at Stanford? Let me know when it's most convenient for you to meet.

Sincerely,

Olive

Not twenty minutes later, a fourth-year who worked with Dr. Holden Rodrigues over in pharmacology came in and took a seat next to Jeremy. They immediately started whispering to each other and pointing at Olive. Any other day she would have been concerned and a little upset, but Dr. Benton had already answered her email, which took priority over . . . anything else, really.

Today, 10:26 a.m.

FROM: Tom-Benton@harvard.edu

TO: Olive-Smith@stanford.edu

SUBJECT: Re: Pancreatic Cancer Screening Project

Olive,

I'm on sabbatical from Harvard this semester, so I'll be staying for several days. A Stanford collaborator and I were just awarded a large grant, and we'll be meeting to talk about setup, etc. Okay if we play it by ear once I'm there?

Cheers,

TB

Sent from my iPhone

Yes! She had several days to convince him to take on her project, which was much better than the ten minutes she'd originally anticipated. Olive fist-pumped—which led to Jeremy and his friend staring at her even more weirdly. What was up with them, anyway? Did she have toothpaste on her face or something? Who cared? She was going to meet Tom Benton and convince him to take her on. *Pancreatic cancer, I'm coming for you.*

She was in an excellent mood until two hours later, when she entered the biology TA meeting and a sudden silence dropped in the room. About fifteen pairs of eyes fixed on her —not a reaction she was accustomed to receiving.

"Uh—hi?"

A couple of people said hi back. Most averted their gazes. Olive told herself that she was just imagining things. *Must be low blood sugar. Or high. One of the two.*

"Hey, Olive." A seventh-year who had never before acknowledged her existence moved his backpack and freed the seat next to his. "How are you?"

"Good." She sat down gingerly, trying to keep the suspicion from her tone. "Um, you?"

"Great."

There was something about his smile. Something salacious and fake. Olive was considering asking about it when the head TA managed to get the projector to work and called everyone's attention to the meeting.

After that, things became even weirder. Dr. Aslan stopped by the lab just to ask Olive if there was anything she'd like to talk about; Chase, a grad in her lab, let her use the PCR machine first, even though he usually hoarded it like a third grader with his last piece of Halloween candy; the lab manager *winked* at Olive as he handed her a stack of blank paper for the printer. And then she met Malcolm in the all-gender restroom, completely by chance, and suddenly everything made sense.

"You sneaky monster," he hissed. His black eyes were almost comically narrow. "I've been texting you all day."

"Oh." Olive patted the back pocket of her jeans, and then the front one, trying to remember the last time she had seen her phone. "I think I might have left my phone at home."

“I cannot believe it.”

“Believe what?”

“I cannot believe *you*.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“I thought we were friends.”

“We are.”

“Good friends.”

“We are. You and Anh are my best friends. What—”

“Clearly not, if I had to hear it from Stella, who heard it from Jess, who heard it from Jeremy, who heard it from Anh —”

“Hear what?”

“—who heard it from I don’t even know who. And I thought we were friends.”

Something icy crawled its way up Olive’s back. Could it be . . . No. No, it couldn’t be. “Hear what?”

“I’m done. I’m letting the cockroaches eat you. And I’m changing my Netflix password.”

Oh no. “Malcolm. Hear what?”

“That you are dating *Adam Carlsen*.”

OLIVE HAD NEVER been in Carlsen’s lab, but she knew where to find it. It was the biggest, most functional research space in the whole department, coveted by all and a never-ending source of resentment toward Carlsen. She had to swipe her badge once and then once more to access it (she rolled her eyes both times). The second door opened directly onto the lab space,

and maybe it was because he was as tall as Mount Everest and his shoulders were just as large, but Carlsen was the very first thing she noticed. He was peering at a Southern blot next to Alex, a grad who was one year ahead of Olive, but he turned toward the entrance the moment she came in.

Olive smiled weakly at him—mainly out of relief at having found him.

It was going to be all right. She was going to explain to him what Malcolm had told her, and without a doubt he was going to find the situation categorically unacceptable and fix it for the both of them, because Olive could *not* spend her next three years surrounded by people who thought that she was dating Adam freaking Carlsen.

The problem was, Carlsen wasn't the only one to notice Olive. There were over a dozen benches in the lab, and at least ten people working at them. Most of them—*all of them*—were staring at Olive. Probably because most of them—*all of them*—had heard that Olive was dating their boss.

Fuck her life.

"Can I talk to you for a minute, Dr. Carlsen?" Rationally, Olive knew that the lab was not furnished in a way that made echoing possible. Still, she felt as though her words bounced off the walls and repeated about four times.

Carlsen nodded, nonplussed, and handed the Southern blot to Alex before heading in her direction. He appeared either unaware or uncaring that approximately two-thirds of his lab members were gaping at him. The remaining ones seemed to be on the verge of a hemorrhagic stroke.

He led Olive to a meeting room just outside the main lab space, and she followed him silently, trying not to dwell on the fact that a lab full of people who thought that she and Carlsen were dating had just seen them enter a private room. Alone.

This was the worst. The absolute worst.

"Everyone knows," she blurted out as soon as the door closed behind her.

He studied her for a moment, looking puzzled. "Are you okay?"

"Everyone knows. About us."

He cocked his head, crossing his arms over his chest. It had been barely a day since they'd last talked, but apparently long enough for Olive to have forgotten his . . . his presence. Or whatever it was that made her feel like she was small and delicate whenever he was around. "Us?"

"Us."

He seemed confused, so Olive elaborated.

"Us, dating—not that we're dating, but Anh clearly thought so, and she told . . ." She realized that the words were tumbling out and forced herself to slow down. "Jeremy. And he told everyone, and now everyone knows. Or they think they know, even though there's absolutely *nothing* to know. As you and I know."

He took it in for a moment and then nodded slowly. "And when you say everyone . . . ?"

"I mean *everyone*." She pointed in the direction of his lab. "Those people? They know. The other grads? They know. Cherie, the department secretary? She totally knows. Gossip in this department is the worst. And they all think that I am dating a *professor*."

"I see," he said, seeming strangely unbothered by this clusterfuck. It should have calmed Olive down, but it only had the effect of driving her panic up a notch.

"I am sorry this happened. *So* sorry. This is all my fault." She wiped a hand down her face. "But I didn't think that . . . I

understand why Anh would tell Jeremy—I mean, getting those two together was the whole point of this charade—but . . . Why would Jeremy tell anyone?"

Carlsen shrugged. "Why wouldn't he?"

She looked up. "What do you mean?"

"A grad student dating a faculty member seems like an interesting piece of information to share."

Olive shook her head. "It's not that interesting. Why would people be interested?"

He lifted one eyebrow. "Someone once told me that 'Gossip in this department is the wor—' "

"Okay, okay. Point taken." She took a deep breath and started pacing, trying to ignore the way Carlsen was studying her, how relaxed he looked, arms across his chest while leaning against the conference table. He was not supposed to be calm. He was supposed to be incensed. He was a known dick with a reputation for arrogance—the idea of people thinking that he was dating a nobody should be mortifying to him. The burden of freaking out should not be falling on Olive alone.

"This is— We need to do something, of course. We need to tell people that this is not true and that we made it all up. Except that they'll think that I'm crazy, and maybe that you are, too, so we have to come up with some other story. Yes, okay, we need to tell people we're not together anymore—"

"And what will Anh and what's-his-face do?"

Olive stopped pacing. "Uh?"

"Won't your friends feel bad about dating if they think we're not together? Or that you lied to them?"

She hadn't thought of that. "I— Maybe. Maybe, but—"

It *was* true that Anh had seemed happy. Maybe she had already invited Jeremy to accompany her to that movie festival—possibly right after telling him about Olive and Carlsen, damn her. But this was exactly what Olive had wanted.

"Are you going to tell her the truth?"

She let out a panicked sound. "I can't. Not *now*." God, why did Olive ever agree to date Jeremy? She wasn't even into him. Yes, the Irish accent and the ginger hair were cute, but not worth any of this. "Maybe we can tell people that I broke up with you?"

"That's very flattering," Dr. Carlsen deadpanned. She couldn't quite figure out if he was joking.

"Fine. We can say that you broke up with me."

"Because that sounds credible," he said drily, almost below his breath. She was not sure she'd heard him correctly and had no idea what he might mean, but she was starting to feel very upset. Fine, she had been the one to kiss him first—God, she'd *kissed* Adam Carlsen; this was her life; these were her choices—but his actions in the break room the day before surely hadn't helped matters. He could at least display some concern. There was no way he was okay with everyone believing that he was attracted to some random girl with one point five publications—yes, that paper she had revised and resubmitted three weeks ago counted as half.

"What if we tell people that it was a mutual breakup?"

He nodded. "Sounds good."

Olive perked up. "Really? Great, then! We'll—"

"We could ask Cherie to add it to the departmental newsletter."

"What?"

“Or do you think a public announcement before seminar would be better?”

“No. No, it’s—”

“Maybe we should ask IT to put it on the Stanford home page. That way people would know—”

“Okay, okay, fine! I get it.”

He looked at her evenly for a moment, and when he spoke, his tone was reasonable in a way she would never have expected of Adam “Ass” Carlsen. “If what bothers you is that people are talking about you dating a professor, the damage is done, I’m afraid. Telling everyone that we broke up is not going to undo the fact that they think we dated.”

Olive’s shoulders slumped. She hated that he was right. “Okay, then. If you have any ideas on how to fix this mess, by all means I am open to—”

“You could let them go on thinking it.”

For a moment, she thought she hadn’t heard him correctly. “W-What?”

“You can let people go on thinking that we’re dating. It solves your problem with your friend and what’s-his-face, and you don’t have much to lose, since it sounds like from a . . . reputation standpoint”—he said the word “reputation” rolling his eyes a little, as if the concept of caring about what others thought were the dumbest thing since homeopathic antibiotics —“things cannot get any worse for you.”

This was . . . Out of everything . . . In her life, Olive had never, she had *never* . . .

“What?” she asked again, feebly.

He shrugged. “Seems like a win-win to me.”

It *so* did not, to Olive. It seemed like a lose-lose, and then lose again, and then lose some more, type of situation. It

seemed insane.

"You mean . . . forever?" She thought her voice came out whiny, but it was possible that it was just an effect of the blood pounding in her head.

"That sounds excessive. Maybe until your friends are not dating anymore? Or until they're more settled? I don't know. Whatever works best, I guess." He was serious about this. He was not joking.

"Are you not . . ." Olive had no idea how to even ask it. "Married, or something?" He must have been in his early thirties. He had a fantastic job; he was tall with thick, wavy black hair, clearly smart, even attractive looking; he was *built*. Yeah, he was a moody dick, but some women wouldn't mind it. Some women might even like it.

He shrugged. "My wife and the twins won't mind."

Oh, shit.

Olive felt a wave of heat wash over her. She blushed crimson and then almost died of shame, because— God, she had forced a married man, a *father*, to kiss her. Now people thought that he was having an affair. His wife was probably crying into her pillow. His kids would grow up with horrible daddy issues and become serial killers.

"I . . . Oh my God, I didn't— I am *so* sorry—"

"Just kidding."

"I really had no idea that you—"

"Olive. I was joking. I'm not married. No kids."

A wave of relief crashed into her. Followed by just as much anger. "Dr. Carlsen, this is not something you should joke—"

"You really need to start calling me Adam. Since we've reportedly been dating for a while."

Olive exhaled slowly, pinching the bridge of her nose. “Why would you even— What would you even get out of this?”

“Out of what?”

“Pretending to date me. Why do you care? What’s in it for you?”

Dr. Carlsen—Adam—opened his mouth, and for a moment Olive had the impression that he was going to say something important. But then he averted his gaze, and all that came out was “It would help you out.” He hesitated for a moment. “And I have my own reasons.”

She narrowed her eyes. “What reasons?”

“Reasons.”

“If it’s criminal, I’d rather not be involved.”

He smiled a bit. “It’s not.”

“If you don’t tell me, I have no choice but to assume that it entails kidnapping. Or arson. Or embezzlement.”

He seemed preoccupied for a moment, fingertips drumming against a large biceps. It considerably strained his shirt. “If I tell you, it cannot leave this room.”

“I think we can both agree that *nothing* that has happened in this room should ever leave it.”

“Good point,” he conceded. He paused. Sighed. Chewed on the inside of his cheek for a second. Sighed again.

“Okay,” he finally said, sounding like a man who knew that he was going to regret speaking the second he opened his mouth. “I’m considered a flight risk.”

“Flight risk?” God, he was a felon on parole. A jury of his peers had convicted him for crimes against grad students. He’d

probably whacked someone on the head with a microscope for mislabeling peptide samples. “So it *is* something criminal.”

“What? No. The department suspects that I’m making plans to leave Stanford and move to another institution. Normally it wouldn’t bother me, but Stanford has decided to freeze my research funds.”

“Oh.” Not what she’d thought. Not at all. “Can they?”

“Yes. Well, up to one-third of them. The reasoning is that they don’t want to fund the research and further the career of someone who—they believe—is going to leave anyway.”

“But if it’s only one-third—”

“It’s millions of dollars,” he said levelly. “That I had earmarked for projects that I planned to finish within the next year. Here, at Stanford. Which means that I need those funds soon.”

“Oh.” Come to think of it, Olive had been hearing scuttlebutt about Carlsen being recruited by other universities since her first year. A few months earlier there had even been a rumor that he might go work for NASA. “Why do they think that? And why now?”

“A number of reasons. The most relevant is that a few weeks ago I was awarded a grant—a very large grant—with a scientist at another institution. That institution had tried to recruit me in the past, and Stanford sees the collaboration as an indication that I am planning to accept.” He hesitated before continuing. “More generally, I have been made aware that the . . . optics are that I have not put down roots because I want to be able to flee Stanford at the drop of a hat.”

“Roots?”

“Most of my grads will be done within the year. I have no extended family in the area. No wife, no children. I’m currently renting—I’d have to buy a house just to convince the

department that I'm committed to staying," he said, clearly irritated. "If I was in a relationship . . . that would really help."

Okay. That made sense. But. "Have you considered getting a real girlfriend?"

His eyebrow lifted. "Have you considered getting a real date?"

"Touché."

Olive fell silent and studied him for a few moments, letting him study her in return. Funny how she used to be scared of him. Now he was the only person in the world who knew about her worst fuckup ever, and it was hard to feel intimidated—even harder, after discovering that he was the kind of person who'd be desperate enough to pretend to date someone to get his research funds back. Olive was sure that she would do the exact same for the opportunity to finish her study on pancreatic cancer, which made Adam seem oddly . . . relatable. And if he was relatable, then she could go ahead and fake-date him, right?

No. Yes. No. What? She was crazy for even considering this. She was certifiably mental. And yet she found herself saying, "It would be complicated."

"What would be?"

"To pretend that we're dating."

"Really? It would be complicated to make people think that we're dating?"

Oh, he was impossible. "Okay, I see your point. But it would be hard to do so convincingly for a prolonged period."

He shrugged. "We'll be fine, as long as we say hi to each other in the hallways and you don't call me Dr. Carlsen."

"I don't think people who are dating just . . . say hi to each other."

"What do people who are dating do?"

It beat Olive. She had gone on maybe five dates in her life, including the ones with Jeremy, and they had ranged from moderately boring to anxiety inducing to horrifying (mostly when a guy had monologued about his grandmother's hip replacement in frightening detail). She would have loved to have someone in her life, but she doubted it was in store for her. Maybe she was unlovable. Maybe spending so many years alone had warped her in some fundamental way and that was why she seemed to be unable to develop a true romantic connection, or even the type of attraction she often heard others talk about. In the end, it didn't really matter. Grad school and dating went poorly together, anyway, which was probably why Dr. Adam Carlsen, MacArthur Fellow and genius extraordinaire, was standing here at thirtysomething years old, asking Olive what people did on dates.

Academics, ladies and gentlemen.

"Um . . . things. Stuff." Olive racked her brain. "People go out and do activities together. Like apple picking, or those Paint and Sip things." *Which are idiotic*, Olive thought.

"Which are idiotic," Adam said, gesturing dismissively with those huge hands of his. "You could just go to Anh and tell her that we went out and painted a Monet. Sounds like she'd take care of letting everyone else know."

"Okay, first of all, it was Jeremy. Let's agree to blame Jeremy. And it's more than that," Olive insisted. "People who date, they—they talk. A lot. More than just greetings in the hallway. They know each other's favorite colors, and where they were born, and they . . . they hold hands. They *kiss*."

Adam pressed his lips together as if to suppress a smile. "We could never do *that*."

A fresh wave of mortification crashed into Olive. "I *am* sorry about the kiss. I really didn't think, and—"

He shook his head. “It’s fine.”

He did seem uncharacteristically indifferent to the situation, especially for a guy who was known to freak out when people got the atomic number of selenium wrong. No, he wasn’t indifferent. He was *amused*.

Olive cocked her head. “Are you enjoying this?”

“ ‘Enjoying’ is probably not the right word, but you have to admit that it’s quite entertaining.”

She had no idea what he was talking about. There was nothing entertaining about the fact that she had randomly kissed a faculty member because he was the only person in the hallway and that, as a consequence of that spectacularly idiotic action, everyone thought she was dating someone she’d met exactly twice before today—

She burst into laughter and folded into herself before her train of thought was even over, overwhelmed by the sheer improbability of the situation. *This* was her life. *These* were the results of her actions. When she could finally breathe again, her abs hurt and she had to wipe her eyes. “This is the worst.”

He was smiling, staring at her with a strange light in his eyes. And would you look at that: Adam Carlsen had dimples. Cute ones. “Yep.”

“And it’s all my fault.”

“Pretty much. I kind of yanked Anh’s chain yesterday, but yeah, I’d say that it’s mostly your fault.”

Fake dating. Adam Carlsen. Olive would have to be a lunatic. “Wouldn’t it be a problem that you’re faculty and I’m a graduate student?”

He tilted his head, going serious. “It wouldn’t look great, but I don’t think so, no. Since I have no authority whatsoever

over you and am not involved in your supervision. But I can ask around."

It was an epically bad idea. The worst idea ever entertained in the epically bad history of bad ideas. Except that it really would solve this current problem of hers, as well as some of Adam's, in exchange for saying hi to him once a week and making an effort not to call him Dr. Carlsen. It seemed like a pretty good deal.

"Can I think about it?"

"Of course," he said calmly. Reassuringly.

She hadn't thought he'd be like this. After hearing all the stories, and seeing him walk around with that perpetual frown of his, she really hadn't thought he'd be like this. Even if she didn't quite know what *this* even meant.

"And thank you, I guess. For offering. Adam." She added the last word like an afterthought. Trying it out on her lips. It felt weird, but not too weird.

After a long pause, he nodded. "No problem. Olive."

Chapter Three

HYPOTHESIS: *A private conversation with Adam Carlsen will become 150 percent more awkward after the word "sex" is uttered. By me.*

Three days later, Olive found herself standing in front of Adam's office.

She'd never been there before, but she had no problem finding it. The student scurrying out with misty eyes and a terrified expression was a dead giveaway, not to mention that Adam's door was the only one in the hallway completely devoid of pictures of kids, pets, or significant others. Not even a copy of his article that had made the cover of *Nature Methods*, which she knew about from looking him up on Google Scholar the previous day. Just dark brown wood and a metal plaque that read: *Adam J. Carlsen, Ph.D.*

Maybe the *J* stood for "Jackass."

Olive had felt a bit like a creep the night before, scrolling down his faculty web page and going through his list of ten million publications and research grants, staring at a picture of him clearly taken in the middle of a hiking trip and not by Stanford's official photographer. Still, she'd quickly quashed the feeling, telling herself that a thorough academic background check was only logical before embarking on a fake-dating relationship.

She took a deep breath before knocking and then another between Adam's "Come in" and the moment she finally managed to force herself to open the door. When she entered the office, he didn't immediately look up and continued typing

on his iMac. “My office hours were over five minutes ago, so —”

“It’s me.”

His hands halted, hovering half an inch or so above the keyboard. Then he turned his chair toward her. “Olive.”

There was something about the way he talked. Maybe it was an accent, maybe just a quality of his voice. Olive didn’t quite know what, but it was there, in the way he said her name. Precise. Careful. Deep. Unlike anyone else. Familiar—impossibly so.

“What did you say to her?” she asked, trying not to care about how Adam Carlsen spoke. “The girl who ran out in tears?”

It took him a moment to remember that less than sixty seconds ago there had been someone else in the office—someone whom he clearly made cry. “I just gave her feedback on something she wrote.”

Olive nodded, silently thanking all the gods that he was not her adviser and never would be, and studied her surroundings. He had a corner office, of course. Two windows that together must total seventy thousand square meters of glass, and so much light, just standing in the middle of the room would cure twenty people’s seasonal depression. It made sense, what with all the grant money he brought in, what with the prestige, that he’d been given a nice space. Olive’s office, on the other hand, had no windows and smelled funny, probably because she shared it with three other Ph.D. students, even though it was meant to accommodate two at the most.

“I was going to email you. I talked to the dean earlier today,” Adam told her, and she looked back at him.

He was gesturing to the chair in front of his desk. Olive pulled it back and took a seat.

“About you.”

“Oh.” Olive’s stomach dropped. She’d much rather the dean didn’t know about her existence. Then again, she’d also rather not be in this room with Adam Carlsen, have the semester begin in a handful of days, have climate change be a thing. And yet.

“Well, about us,” he amended. “And socialization regulations.”

“What did she say?”

“There’s nothing against you and me dating, since I’m not your adviser.”

A mix of panic and relief flooded through Olive.

“However, there are some issues to consider. I won’t be able to collaborate with you in any formal capacity. And I’m part of the program’s awards committee, which means that I’ll have to excuse myself if you are nominated for fellowships or similar opportunities.”

She nodded. “Fair enough.”

“And I absolutely cannot be part of your thesis committee.”

Olive huffed out a laugh. “That won’t be a problem. I wasn’t going to ask you to be on my committee.”

He narrowed his eyes. “Why not? You study pancreatic cancer, right?”

“Yep. Early detection.”

“Then your work would benefit from the perspective of a computational modeler.”

“Yeah, but there are other computational modelers in the department. And I’d like to eventually graduate, ideally without sobbing in a bathroom stall after each committee meeting.”

He glared at her.

Olive shrugged. “No offense. I’m a simple girl, with simple needs.”

To that, he lowered his gaze to his desk, but not before Olive could see the corner of his mouth twitch. When he looked up again, his expression was serious. “So, have you decided?”

She pressed her lips together as he watched her calmly. She took a deep breath before saying, “Yes. Yes, I . . . I want to do it. It’s a good idea, actually.”

For so many reasons. It would get Anh and Jeremy off her back, but also . . . also everyone else. It was as if since the rumor had begun to spread, people had been too intimidated by Olive to give her the usual shit. The other TAs had quit trying to switch her nice 2:00 p.m. sections with their horrifying 8:00 a.m. ones, her lab mates had stopped cutting in front of her in the line for the microscope, and two different faculty members Olive had been trying to get ahold of for weeks had finally deigned to answer her emails. It felt a little unfair to exploit this huge misunderstanding, but academia was a lawless land and Olive’s life in it had been nothing but miserable for the past two years. She had learned to grab whatever she could get away with. And if some—okay, if most of the grads in the department looked at her suspiciously because she was dating Adam Carlsen, so be it. Her friends seemed to be largely fine with this, if a little bemused.

Except for Malcolm. He’d been shunning her like she had the pox for three solid days. But Malcolm was Malcolm—he’d come around.

“Very well, then.” He was completely expressionless—almost *too* expressionless. Like it was no big deal and he didn’t care either way; like if she’d said no, it wouldn’t have changed anything for him.

“Though, I’ve been thinking about this a lot.”

He waited patiently for her to continue.

“And I think that it would be best if we laid down some ground rules. Before starting.”

“Ground rules?”

“Yes. You know. What we are allowed and not allowed to do. What we can expect from this arrangement. I think that’s pretty standard protocol, before embarking on a fake-dating relationship.”

He tilted his head. “Standard protocol?”

“Yup.”

“How many times have you done this?”

“Zero. But I am familiar with the trope.”

“The . . . what?” He blinked at her, confused.

Olive ignored him. “Okay.” She inhaled deeply and lifted her index finger. “First of all, this should be a strictly on-campus arrangement. Not that I think you’d want to meet me off campus, but just in case you were planning to kill two birds with one stone, I’m not going to be your last-minute backup if you need to bring a date home for Christmas, or—”

“Hanukkah.”

“What?”

“My family is more likely to celebrate Hanukkah than Christmas.” He shrugged. “Though I’m unlikely to celebrate either.”

“Oh.” Olive pondered it for a moment. “I guess this is something your fake girlfriend should know.”

The ghost of a smile appeared on his mouth, but he said nothing.

“Okay. Second rule. Actually, it could be interpreted as an extension of the first rule. But”—Olive bit into her lip, willing herself to bring it up—“no sex.”

For several moments he simply didn’t move. Not even a millimeter. Then his lips parted, but no sound came out, and that’s when Olive realized that she had just rendered Adam Carlsen speechless. Which would have been funny any other day, but the fact that he seemed dumbfounded by Olive not wanting to include sex in their fake-dating relationship made her stomach sink.

Had he assumed that they would? Was it something she’d said? Should she explain that she’d had very little sex in her life? That for years she’d wondered whether she was asexual and she had realized only recently that she *might* be able to experience sexual attraction, but only with people she trusted deeply? That if for some inexplicable reason Adam wanted to have sex with her, she wasn’t going to be able to go through with it?

“Listen”—she made to stand from the chair, panic rising in her throat—“I’m sorry, but if one of the reasons you offered to fake-date is that you thought that we would—”

“*No*.” The word half exploded out of him. He looked genuinely appalled. “I’m shocked that you’d even feel the need to bring it up.”

“Oh.” Olive’s cheeks heated at the indignation in his voice. Right. Of course he didn’t expect that. Or even want that, with her. Look at him—why would he? “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to assume—”

“No, it makes sense to be up-front. I was just surprised.”

“I know.” Olive nodded. Honestly, she was a little surprised, too. That she was sitting in Adam Carlsen’s office, talking about sex—not the meiosis kind of sex, but potential

sexual intercourse between the two of them. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to make things weird.”

“It’s okay. This whole thing is weird.” The silence between them stretched, and Olive noticed that he was blushing faintly. Just a dusting of red, but he looked so . . . Olive couldn’t stop staring.

“No sex,” he confirmed with a nod.

She had to clear her throat and shake herself out of inspecting the shape and color of his cheekbones.

“No sex,” she repeated. “Okay. Third. It’s not really a rule, but here goes: I won’t date anyone else. As in real dating. It would be messy and complicate everything and . . .” Olive hesitated. Should she tell him? Was it too much information? Did he need to know? Oh, well. Why not, at this point? It wasn’t like she hadn’t kissed the man, or brought up sex in his place of work. “I don’t date, anyway. Jeremy was an exception. I’ve never . . . I’ve never dated seriously before, and it’s probably for the best. Grad school is stressful enough, and I have my friends, and my project on pancreatic cancer, and honestly there’s better things to use my time for.” The last few words came out more defensively than she’d intended.

Adam just stared and said nothing.

“But you can date, of course,” she added hastily. “Though I’d appreciate it if you could avoid telling people in the department, just so I don’t look like an idiot and you don’t look like you’re cheating on me and rumors don’t balloon out of control. It would benefit you, too, since you’re trying to look like you’re in a committed relationship—”

“I won’t.”

“Okay. Great. Thanks. I know lying by omission can be a pain, but—”

“I mean, I won’t date someone else.”

There was a certainty, a finality in his tone that took her by surprise. She could only nod, even though she wanted to protest that he couldn't possibly know, even though a million questions surfaced in her mind. Ninety-nine percent of them were inappropriate and not her business, so she shooed them away.

"Okay. Fourth. We obviously can't keep on doing this forever, so we should give ourselves a deadline."

His lips pressed together. "When would that be?"

"I'm not sure. A month or so would probably be enough to convince Anh that I'm firmly over Jeremy. But it might not be enough on *your* end, so . . . you tell me."

He mulled it, and then nodded once. "September twenty-ninth."

It was a little over a month from now. But also . . . "That's a weirdly specific date." Olive racked her head, trying to figure out why it could be meaningful. The only thing that came to mind was that she'd be in Boston that week for the annual biology conference.

"It's the day after the department's final budget review. If they don't release my funds by then, they won't release them at all."

"I see. Well, then, let's agree that on September twenty-ninth we part ways. I'll tell Anh that our breakup was amicable but that I'm a little sad about it because I still have a bit of a crush on you." She grinned at him. "Just so she won't suspect that I'm still hung up on Jeremy. Okay." She took a deep breath. "Fifth and last."

This was the tricky one. The one she was afraid he'd object to. She noticed that she was wringing her hands and placed them firmly in her lap.

“For this to work we should probably . . . do things together. Every once in a while.”

“Things?”

“Things. Stuff.”

“Stuff,” he repeated dubiously.

“Yep. Stuff. What do you do for fun?” He was probably into something atrocious, like cow-tipping excursions or Japanese beetle fighting. Maybe he collected porcelain dolls. Maybe he was an avid geocacher. Maybe he frequented vaping conventions. Oh God.

“Fun?” he repeated, like he’d never heard the word before.

“Yeah. What do you do when you’re not at work?”

The length of time that passed between Olive’s question and his answer was alarming. “Sometimes I work at home, too. And I work out. And I sleep.”

She had to actively stop herself from face-palming. “Um, great. Anything else?”

“What do *you* do for fun?” he asked, somewhat defensively.

“Plenty of things. I . . .” *Go to the movies*. Though she hadn’t been since the last time Malcolm had dragged her. *Play board games.* But every single one of her friends was too busy lately, so not that, either. She’d participated in that volleyball tournament, but it had been over a year ago.

“Um. I work out?” She would have loved to wipe that smug expression off his face. So much. “Whatever. We should do something together on a regular basis. I don’t know, maybe get coffee? Like, once a week? Just for ten minutes, at a place where people could easily see us. I know it sounds annoying and like a waste of time, but it’ll be super short, and it would make the fake dating more credible, and—”

“Sure.”

Oh.

She’d thought it would take more convincing. A lot more. Then again, this was in his interest, too. He needed his colleagues to believe in their relationship if he was to cajole them into releasing his funding.

“Okay. Um . . .” She forced herself to stop wondering why he was being so accommodating and tried to visualize her schedule. “How about Wednesday?”

Adam angled his chair to face his computer and pulled up a calendar app. It was so full of colorful boxes that Olive felt a surge of vicarious anxiety.

“It works before eleven a.m. And after six p.m.”

“Ten?”

He turned back to her. “Ten’s good.”

“Okay.” She waited for him to type it in, but he made no move to. “Aren’t you going to add it to your calendar?”

“I’ll remember,” he told her evenly.

“Okay, then.” She made an effort to smile, and it felt relatively sincere. Way more sincere than any smile she’d ever thought she’d be able to muster in Adam Carlsen’s presence. “Great. Fake-dating Wednesday it is.”

A line appeared between his eyebrows. “Why do you keep saying that?”

“Saying what?”

“ ‘Fake dating.’ Like it’s a thing.”

“Because it is. Don’t you watch rom-coms?”

He stared at her with a puzzled expression, until she cleared her throat and looked down at her knees. “Right.” God, they had nothing in common. They’d never find anything to

talk about. Their ten-minute coffee breaks were going to be the most painful, awkward parts of her already painful, awkward weeks.

But Anh was going to have her beautiful love story, and Olive wouldn't have to wait for ages to use the electron microscope. That was all that mattered.

She stood and thrust her hand out to him, figuring that every fake-dating arrangement deserved at least a handshake. Adam studied it hesitantly for a couple of seconds. Then he stood and clasped her fingers. He stared at their joined hands before meeting her eyes, and Olive ordered herself not to notice the heat of his skin, or how broad he was, or . . . anything else about him. When he finally let go, she had to make a conscious effort not to inspect her palm.

Had he done something to her? It sure felt like it. Her flesh was tingling.

"When do you want to start?"

"How about next week?" It was Friday. Which meant that she had fewer than seven days to psychologically prepare for the experience of getting coffee with Adam Carlsen. She knew that she could do this—if she had worked her way up to a ninety-seventh percentile on the verbal portion of the GRE, she could do anything, or as good as—but it still seemed like a horrible idea.

"Sounds good."

It was happening. Oh God. "Let's meet at the Starbucks on campus. It's where most of the grads get coffee—someone's bound to spot us." She headed for the door, pausing to glance back at Adam. "I guess I'll see you for fake-dating Wednesday, then?"

He was still standing behind his desk, arms crossed on his chest. Looking at Olive. Looking entirely less irritated by this

mess than she'd ever have expected. Looking . . . nice. "See you, Olive."

"PASS THE SALT."

Olive would have, but Malcolm looked like he was already salty enough. So she leaned her hip against the kitchen counter and folded her arms across her chest. "Malcolm."

"And the pepper."

"Malcolm."

"And the oil."

"Malcolm . . ."

"Sunflower. Not that grape-seed crap."

"Listen. It's not what you think—"

"Fine. I'll get them myself."

To be fair, Malcolm had every right to be mad. And Olive did feel for him. He was one year ahead of her, and the scion of STEM royalty. The product of generations of biologists, geologists, botanists, physicists, and who knows what other -ists mixing their DNA and spawning little science machines. His father was a dean at some state school on the East Coast. His mother had a TED Talk on Purkinje cells with several million views on YouTube. Did Malcolm want to be in a Ph.D. program, headed for an academic career? Probably no. Did he have any other choice, considering the pressure his family had put on him since he was in diapers? Also no.

Not to say that Malcolm was unhappy. His plan was to get his Ph.D., find a nice cushy industry job, and make lots of money working nine-to-five—which technically qualified as "being a scientist," which in turn was not something his

parents would be able to object to. At least, not too strenuously. In the meantime, all he wanted was to have a grad school experience that was as un-traumatizing as possible. Out of everyone in Olive's program, he was the one who best managed to have a life outside of grad school. He did things that were unimaginable to most grads, like cooking real food! Going for hikes! Meditating! Acting in a play! Dating like it was an Olympic sport! ("It *is* an Olympic sport, Olive. And I am training for gold.")

Which was why when Adam forced Malcolm to throw out tons of data and redo half his study, it made for a very, very miserable few months. In retrospect, that might have been when Malcolm started wishing a plague on the Carlsen house (he had been rehearsing for *Romeo and Juliet* at the time).

"Malcolm, can we please talk about this?"

"We're talking."

"No, you are cooking and I am just standing here, trying to get you to acknowledge that you are mad because Adam—"

Malcolm turned away from his casserole, wagging his finger in Olive's direction. "Do not say it."

"Do not say what?"

"You know what."

"Adam Carl—?"

"Do *not* say his name."

She threw her hands up. "This is crazy. It's fake, Malcolm."

He went back to chopping the asparagus. "Pass the salt."

"Are you even listening? It's not real."

"And the pepper, and the—"

“The relationship, it’s fake. We’re not really dating. We’re pretending so people will *think* that we’re dating.”

Malcolm’s hands stopped mid-chop. “What?”

“You heard me.”

“Is it a . . . friends-with-benefits arrangement? Because—”

“No. It’s the opposite. There are no benefits. Zero benefits. Zero sex. Zero friends, too.”

He stared at her, narrow-eyed. “To be clear, oral and butt stuff totally counts as sex—”

“Malcolm.”

He took a step closer, grabbing a dishrag to wipe his hands, nostrils flaring. “I’m scared to ask.”

“I know it sounds ridiculous. He’s helping me out by pretending we’re together because I lied to Anh, and I need her to feel okay about dating Jeremy. It’s all fake. Adam and I have talked exactly”—she decided on the spot to omit any information pertinent to The Night—“three times, and I know nothing about him. Except that he’s willing to help me handle this situation, and I jumped at the chance.”

Malcolm was making that face, the one he reserved for people who wore sandals paired with white socks. He could be a little scary, she had to admit.

“This is . . . wow.” There was a vein pulsating on his forehead. “Ol, this is breathtakingly stupid.”

“Maybe.” Yes. Yes, it was. “But it is what it is. And you have to support me in my idiocy, because you and Anh are my best friends.”

“Isn’t Carlsen your best friend now?”

“Come on, Malcolm. He’s an ass. But he’s actually been pretty nice to me, and—”

“I’m not even—” He grimaced. “I’m not going to address this.”

She sighed. “Okay. Don’t address this. You don’t have to. But can you just not hate me? Please? I know he’s been a nightmare to half the grads in the program, you included. But he’s helping me out. You and Anh are the only ones I care about knowing the truth. But I can’t tell Anh—”

“—for obvious reasons.”

“—for obvious reasons,” she finished at the same time, and smiled. He just shook his head disapprovingly, but his expression had softened.

“Ol. You’re amazing. And kind, way too kind. You should find someone better than Carlsen. Someone to date for real.”

“Yeah, right.” She rolled her eyes. “Because it went so well with Jeremy. Who, by the way, I only agreed to date following *your* advice! ‘Give the boy a chance,’ you said. ‘What could possibly go wrong?’ you said.”

Malcolm glared, and she laughed.

“Listen, I’m clearly bad at real dating. Maybe fake dating will be different. Maybe I’ve found my niche.”

He sighed. “Does it have to be Carlsen? There are better faculty members to fake-date.”

“Like who?”

“I don’t know. Dr. McCoy?”

“Didn’t her wife just give birth to triplets?”

“Oh, yeah. What about Holden Rodrigues? He’s hot. Cute smile, too. I would know—he always smiles at me.”

Olive burst into laughter. “I could never fake-date Dr. Rodrigues, not with how assiduously you’ve been thirsting after him for the past two years.”

“I have, haven’t I? Did I ever tell you about the serious flirting that happened between us at the undergrad research fair? I’m pretty sure he winked at me multiple times from the other side of the room. Now, some say he just had something in his eye, but—”

“Me. *I* said that he probably had something in his eye. And you tell me about it every other day.”

“Right.” He sighed. “You know, Ol, I would have fake-dated you myself in a heartbeat, to spare you from goddamned Carlsen. I would have held hands with you, and given you my jacket when you were cold, and very publicly gifted you chocolate roses and teddy bears on Valentine’s Day.”

How refreshing, to talk with someone who’d watched a rom-com. Or ten. “I know. But you also bring home a different person every week, and you love it, and I love that you love it. I don’t want to cramp your style.”

“Fair.” Malcolm looked pleased—whether at the fact that he really did get around a fair bit or at Olive’s thorough understanding of his dating habits, she wasn’t sure.

“Can you please not hate me, then?”

He tossed the kitchen cloth onto the counter and stepped closer. “Ol. I could never hate you. You’ll always be my kalamata.” He pulled her into his chest, hugging her tight. At the beginning, when they’d just met, Olive had been constantly disoriented by how physical he was, probably because it had been years since she’d experienced such affectionate contact. Now, Malcolm’s hugs were her happy place.

She laid her head on his shoulder and smiled into the cotton of his T-shirt. “Thanks.”

Malcolm held her tighter.

“And I promise if I ever bring Adam home, I’ll put a sock on my door— *Ouch!*”

“You evil creature.”

“I was kidding! Wait, don’t leave, I have something important to tell you.”

He paused by the door, scowling. “I’ve reached my maximum daily intake of Carlsen-related conversation. Anything further will be lethal, so—”

“Tom Benton, the cancer researcher from Harvard, reached out to me! It’s not decided yet, but he might be interested in having me in his lab next year.”

“Oh my God.” Malcolm walked back to her, delighted. “Ol, this is amazing! I thought none of the researchers you contacted had gotten back to you?”

“Not for the longest time. But now Benton has, and you know how famous and well-known he is. He probably has more research funds than I could ever dream of. It would be —”

“Fantastic. It would really be fantastic. Ol. I am so proud of you.” Malcolm took her hands in his. His face-splitting grin slowly gentled. “And your mom would be so proud, too.”

Olive looked away, blinking rapidly. She didn’t want to cry, not tonight. “Nothing is set in stone. I’ll have to persuade him. It will involve quite a bit of politicking and going through the whole ‘pitch me your research’ bit. Which as you know is not my forte. It might still not work out—”

“It *will* work out.”

Right. Yes. She needed to be optimistic. She nodded, attempting a smile.

“But even if it didn’t . . . she would still be proud.”

Olive nodded again. When a single tear managed to slide down her cheek, she decided to let it be.

Forty-five minutes later, she and Malcolm sat on their minuscule couch, arms pressed together, watching reruns of *American Ninja Warrior* while they ate a very undersalted veggie casserole.

Chapter Four

HYPOTHESIS: *Adam Carlsen and I have absolutely nothing in common, and having coffee with him will be twice as painful as a root canal. Without anesthesia.*

Olive arrived to the first fake-dating Wednesday late and in the foulest of moods, after a morning spent growling at her cheap, knockoff reagents for not dissolving, then not precipitating, then not sonicating, then not being enough for her to run her entire assay.

She paused outside the coffee shop's door and took a deep breath. She needed a better lab if she wanted to produce decent science. Better equipment. Better reagents. Better bacteria cultures. Better *everything*. Next week, when Tom Benton arrived, she had to be on top of her game. She needed to prepare her spiel, not waste time on a coffee she didn't particularly want, with a person she most definitely didn't want to talk to, halfway through her experimental protocol.

Ugh.

When she stepped inside the café, Adam was already there, wearing a black Henley that looked like it was ideated, designed, and produced specifically with the upper half of his body in mind. Olive was momentarily bemused, not so much that his clothes fit him well, but that she'd noticed what someone was wearing to begin with. It was not like her. She'd been seeing Adam traipse around the biology building for the better part of two years, after all, not to mention that in the past couple of weeks they'd spoken an inordinate amount of times. They had even kissed, if one counted what had happened on The Night as a proper kiss. It was dizzying and a

little unsettling, the realization that sank into her as they got in line to order their coffee.

Adam Carlsen was handsome.

Adam Carlsen, with his long nose and wavy hair, with his full lips and angular face that shouldn't have fit together but somehow did, was really, really, *really* handsome. Olive had no clue why it hadn't registered before, or why what made her realize it was him putting on a plain black shirt.

She willed herself to stare ahead at the drink menu instead of his chest. In the coffee shop, there were a total of three biology grad students, one pharmacology postdoc, and one undergraduate research assistant eyeing them. *Perfect*.

"So. How are you?" she asked, because it was the thing to do.

"Fine. You?"

"Fine."

It occurred to Olive that maybe she hadn't thought this through as thoroughly as she should have. Because being seen together might have been their goal, but standing next to each other in silence was not going to fool anyone into thinking that they were blissfully dating. And Adam was . . . well. He seemed unlikely to initiate any kind of conversation.

"So." Olive shifted her weight to the balls of her feet a couple of times. "What's your favorite color?"

He looked at her, confused. "What?"

"Your favorite color."

"My favorite color?"

"Yep."

There was a crease between his eyes. "I—don't know?"

"What do you mean you don't know?"

“They’re colors. They’re all the same.”

“There must be one you like most.”

“I don’t think so.”

“Red?”

“I don’t know.”

“Yellow? Vomit green?”

His eyes narrowed. “Why are you asking?”

Olive shrugged. “It feels like something I should know.”

“Why?”

“Because. If someone tries to figure out whether we’re really dating, it might be one of the first questions they ask. Top five, for sure.”

He studied her for a few seconds. “Does that seem like a likely scenario to you?”

“About as likely as me fake-dating you.”

He nodded, as if conceding her point. “Okay. Black, I guess.”

She snorted. “Figures.”

“What’s wrong with black?” He frowned.

“It’s not even a color. It’s no colors, technically.”

“It’s better than vomit green.”

“No, it isn’t.”

“Of course it is.”

“Yeah, well. It suits your scion-of-darkness personality.”

“What does that even—”

“Good morning.” The barista smiled at them cheerfully. “What will you have today?”

Olive smiled back, gesturing at Adam to order first.

"Coffee." He darted a glance at her before adding, sheepishly, "Black."

She had to duck her head to hide her smile, but when she glanced at him again, the corner of his mouth was curved upward. Which, she reluctantly admitted to herself, was not a bad look for him. She ignored it and ordered the most fatty, sugary thing on the drink menu, asking for extra whipped cream. She was wondering if she should try to make up for it by buying an apple, too, or if she should just lean into it and top it off with a cookie, when Adam took a credit card out of his wallet and held it to the cashier.

"Oh, no. No, no, no. *No*." Olive put her hand in front of his and lowered her voice. "You can't pay for my stuff."

He blinked. "I can't?"

"That's not the kind of fake relationship we're having."

He looked surprised. "It isn't?"

"Nope." She shook her head. "I would never fake-date a dude who thinks that he has to pay for my coffee just because he's a dude."

He lifted an eyebrow. "I doubt a language exists in which the thing you just ordered could be referred to as 'coffee.' "

"Hey—"

"And it's not about me being a 'dude' "—the word came out a touch pained—"but about you still being a grad student. And your yearly income."

For a moment she hesitated, wondering if she should be offended. Was Adam being his well-known ass self? Was he patronizing her? Did he think she was poor? Then she remembered that she *was*, in fact, poor, and that he probably made five times as much as her. She shrugged, adding a

chocolate chip cookie, a banana, and a pack of gum to her coffee. To his credit, Adam said nothing and paid the resulting $21.39 without batting an eye.

While they were waiting for their drinks, Olive's mind began drifting off to her project and to whether she could convince Dr. Aslan to buy her better reagents soon. She looked distractedly around the coffee shop, finding that even though the research assistant, the postdoc, and one of the students were gone, two grads (one of whom serendipitously happened to work in Anh's lab) were still sitting at a table by the door, glancing toward them every few minutes. Excellent.

She leaned her hip against the counter and looked up at Adam. Thank God this thing was only going to be ten minutes a week, or she'd develop a permanent crick in her neck.

"Where were you born?" she asked.

"Is this another one of your green card marriage interview questions?"

She giggled. He smiled in response, as if pleased to have made her laugh. Though it was certainly for some other reason.

"Netherlands. The Hague."

"Oh."

He leaned against the counter, too, directly in front of her. "Why 'oh'?"

"I don't know." Olive shrugged. "I think I expected . . . New York? Or maybe Kansas?"

He shook his head. "My mother used to be a US ambassador to the Netherlands."

"Wow." Weird, to imagine that Adam had a mother. A family. That before being tall and scary and infamous, he'd been a kid. Maybe he spoke Dutch. Maybe he had smoked

herring for breakfast on the reg. Maybe his mother had wanted him to follow in her footsteps and become a diplomat, but his shiny personality had emerged and she'd given up on that dream. Olive found herself acutely eager to know more about his upbringing, which was . . . weird. Very weird.

"Here you go." Their drinks appeared on the counter. Olive told herself that the way the blond barista was obviously checking out Adam as he turned to retrieve a lid for his cup was none of her business. She also reminded herself that as curious as she was about his diplomat mother, how many languages he spoke, and whether he liked tulips, it was information that went well beyond their arrangement.

People had seen them together. They were going to go back to their labs and tell improbable tales of Dr. Adam Carlsen and the random, unremarkable student they'd spotted him with. Time for Olive to go back to her science.

She cleared her throat. "Well. This was fun."

He looked up from his cup, surprised. "Is fake-dating Wednesday over?"

"Yep. Great job, team, now hit the showers. You're free until next week." Olive stabbed her straw into her drink and took a sip, feeling the sugar explode in her mouth. Whatever she'd ordered, it was disgustingly good. She was probably developing diabetes as she spoke. "I'll see you—"

"Where were *you* born?" Adam asked before she could leave.

Oh. They were doing this, then. He was probably just trying to be polite, and Olive sighed inwardly, thinking longingly of her lab bench. "Toronto."

"Right. You're Canadian," he said, like he'd already known.

"Yep."

“When did you move here?”

“Eight years ago. For college.”

He nodded, as if storing up the information. “Why the US? Canada has excellent schools.”

“I got a full ride.” It was true. If not the whole truth.

He fidgeted with the cardboard cup holder. “Do you go back a lot?”

“Not really, no.” Olive licked some whipped cream off her straw. She was puzzled when he immediately looked away from her.

“Do you plan to move back home once you graduate?”

She tensed. “Not if I can help it.” She had lots of painful memories in Canada, and her only family, the people she wanted nearby, were Anh and Malcolm, both US citizens. Olive and Anh had even made a pact that if Olive was ever on the verge of losing her visa, Anh would marry her. In hindsight, this entire fake-dating business with Adam was going to be great practice for when Olive leveled up and started defrauding the Department of Homeland Security in earnest.

Adam nodded, taking a sip of his coffee. “Favorite color?”

Olive opened her mouth to tell him her favorite color, which was so much better than his, and . . . “Dammit.”

He gave her a knowing look. “Difficult, isn’t it?”

“There are so many good ones.”

“Yup.”

“I’m going to go with blue. Light blue. No, wait!”

“Mmm.”

“Let’s say white. Okay, white.”

He clucked his tongue. “You know, I don’t think I can accept that. White’s not really a color. More like all colors put together—”

Olive pinched him on the fleshy part of his forearm.

“Ow,” he said, clearly not in pain. With a sly smile, he waved goodbye and turned away, heading for the biology building.

“Hey, Adam?” she called after him.

He paused and looked back at her.

“Thanks for buying me three days’ worth of food.”

He hesitated and then nodded, once. That thing he was doing with his mouth—he was *definitely* smiling down at her. A little begrudgingly, but still.

“My pleasure, Olive.”

Today, 2:40 p.m.

FROM: Tom-Benton@harvard.edu

TO: Olive-Smith@stanford.edu

SUBJECT: Re: Pancreatic Cancer Screening Project

Olive,

I’ll be flying in on Tuesday afternoon. How about we meet on Wednesday around 3:00 p.m. in Aysegul Aslan’s lab? My collaborator can point me in its direction.

TB

Sent from my iPhone

OLIVE WAS LATE for her second fake-dating Wednesday, too, but for different reasons—all Tom Benton related.

First, she'd overslept after staying up late the previous night rehearsing how she was going to sell him her project. She'd repeated her spiel so many times that Malcolm had started finishing her sentences, and then, at 1:00 a.m., he'd hurled a nectarine at her and begged her to go practice in her room. Which she had, until 3:00 a.m.

Then, in the morning, she'd realized that her usual lab outfit (leggings, ratty 5K T-shirt, and very, very messy bun) would probably not communicate "valuable future colleague" to Dr. Benton, and spent an excessive amount of time looking for something appropriate. Dress for success and all that.

Finally, it occurred to her that she had no idea what Dr. Benton—arguably the most important person in her life at the moment, and yes, she was aware of how sad that sounded but decided not to dwell on it—even *looked* like. She looked him up on her phone and found out that he was somewhere in his late thirties, blond with blue eyes, and had very straight, very white teeth. When she arrived at the campus Starbucks, Olive was whispering to his Harvard headshot, "Please, let me come work in your lab." Then she noticed Adam.

It was an uncharacteristically cloudy day. Still August, but it almost felt like late fall. Olive glanced at him, and she immediately knew that he was in the nastiest of moods. That rumor of him throwing a petri dish against a wall because his experiment hadn't worked out, or because the electron microscope needed repairs, or because something equally inconsequential had happened came to mind. She considered ducking under the table.

It's okay, she told herself. *This is worth it.* Things with Anh were back to normal. Better than normal: she and Jeremy were officially dating, and last weekend Anh had showed up to

beers-and-s'mores night wearing leggings and an oversize MIT sweater she'd clearly borrowed from him. When Olive had eaten lunch with the two of them the other day, it hadn't even felt awkward. Plus, the first-, second-, and even third-year grads were too scared of Adam Carlsen's "girlfriend" to steal Olive's pipettes, which meant that she didn't have to stuff them in her backpack and take them home for the weekend anymore. And she was getting some grade A free food out of this. She could take Adam Carlsen—yes, even this pitch-black-mood Adam Carlsen. For ten minutes a week, at the very least.

"Hey." She smiled. He responded with a look that exuded moodiness and existential angst. Olive took a fortifying breath. "How are you?"

"Fine." His tone was clipped, his expression tenser than usual. He was wearing a red plaid shirt and jeans, looking more like a wood-chopping lumberjack than a scholar pondering the mysteries of computational biology. She couldn't help noticing the muscles and wondered again if he had his clothes custom-made. His hair was still a bit long but shorter than the previous week. It seemed a little surreal that she and Adam Carlsen were at a point where she was able to keep track of both his moods and his haircuts.

"Ready to get coffee?" she chirped.

He nodded distractedly, barely looking at her. On a table in the back, a fifth-year was glancing at them while pretending to clean the monitor of his laptop.

"Sorry if I was late. I just—"

"It's fine."

"Did you have a good week?"

"Fine."

Okay. "Um . . . did you do anything fun last weekend?"

“I worked.”

They got in line to order, and it was all Olive could do to stop herself from sighing. “Weather’s been nice, right? Not too hot.”

He grunted in response.

It was starting to be a bit much. There was a limit to what Olive would do for this fake-dating relationship—even for a free mango Frappuccino. She sighed. “Is it because of the haircut?”

That got his attention. Adam looked down at her, a vertical line deep between his eyebrows. “What?”

“The mood. Is it because of the haircut?”

“What mood?”

Olive gestured broadly toward him. “This. The bad mood you’re in.”

“I’m not in a bad mood.”

She snorted—though that was probably not the right term for what she just did. It was too loud and derisive, more like a laugh. A snaugh.

“What?” He frowned, unappreciative of her snaugh.

“Come on.”

“What?”

“You *ooze* moodiness.”

“I do not.” He sounded indignant, which struck her as oddly endearing.

“You so do. I saw that face, and I immediately knew.”

“You did not.”

“I did. I do. But it’s fine, you’re allowed to be in a bad mood.”

It was their turn, so she took a step forward and smiled at the cashier.

"Good morning. I'll have a pumpkin spice latte. And that cream cheese danish over there. Yep, that one, thank you. And"—she pointed at Adam with her thumb—"he'll have chamomile tea. No sugar," she added cheerfully. She immediately took a few steps to the side, hoping to avoid damage in case Adam decided to throw a petri dish at her. She was surprised when he calmly handed his credit card to the boy behind the counter. Really, he wasn't as bad as they made him out to be.

"I hate tea," he said. "And chamomile."

Olive beamed up at him. "That is unfortunate."

"You smart-ass."

He stared straight ahead, but she was almost certain that he was about to crack a smile. There was a lot to be said about him but not that he didn't have a sense of humor.

"So . . . not the haircut?"

"Mm? Ah, no. It was a weird length. Getting in my way while I was running."

Oh. So he was a runner. Like Olive. "Okay. Great. Because it doesn't look bad."

It looks good. As in, really good. You were probably one of the most handsome men I'd ever talked to last week, but now you look even better. Not that I care about these things. I don't care at all. I rarely notice guys, and I'm not sure why I'm noticing you*, or your hair, or your clothes, or how tall and broad you are. I really don't get it. I never care. Usually. Ugh.*

"I . . ." He seemed flustered for a second, his lips moving without making a sound as he looked for an appropriate response. Then, out of the blue, he said, "I talked with the

department chair this morning. He's still refusing to release my research funds."

"Oh." She cocked her head. "I thought they weren't due to decide until the end of September."

"They aren't. This was an informal meeting, but the topic came up. He said that he's still monitoring the situation."

"I see." She waited for him to continue. When it became clear that he wouldn't, she asked, "Monitoring . . . how?"

"Unclear." He was clenching his jaw.

"I'm sorry." She felt for him. She really did. If there was something she could empathize with, it was scientific studies coming to an abrupt halt because of a lack of resources. "Does that mean that you can't continue your research?"

"I have other grants."

"So . . . the problem is that you cannot start new studies?"

"I can. I had to rearrange different pots, but I should be able to afford to start new lines of research, too."

Uh? "I see." She cleared her throat. "So . . . let me recap. It sounds like Stanford froze your funds based on rumors, which I agree is a crappy move. But it also sounds like for now you can afford to do what you were planning, so . . . it's not the end of the world?"

Adam gave her an affronted glare, suddenly looking even more cross.

Oh, boy. "Don't get me wrong, I understand the principle of the matter, and I'd be mad, too. But you have, how many other grants? Actually, don't answer that. I'm not sure I want to know."

He probably had fifteen. He also had tenure, and dozens of publications, and there were all those honors listed on his website. Not to mention that she'd read on his CV that he had

one patent. Olive, on the other hand, had cheap knockoff reagents and old pipettes that regularly got stolen. She tried not to dwell on how much further ahead than her he was in his career, but it was unforgettable, how good he was at what he did. How *annoyingly* good.

"My point is, this is not an insurmountable problem. And we're actively working on it. We're in this together, showing people that you're going to stay here forever because of your amazing girlfriend."

Olive pointed to herself with a flourish, and his glare followed her hand. Clearly he was not a fan of rationalizing and working through his emotions.

"Or, you could stay mad, and we could go to your lab and throw test tubes full of toxic reagents at each other until the pain of third-degree burns overrides your shitty mood? Sounds like fun, no?"

He looked away and rolled his eyes, but she could see it in the curve of his cheeks that he was amused. Likely against his will. "You are such a smart-ass."

"Maybe, but I'm not the one who grunted when I asked how your week was."

"I did not grunt. And you ordered me chamomile tea."

She smiled. "You're welcome."

They were quiet for a few moments as she chewed through the first bite of her Danish. Once she'd swallowed she said, "I'm sorry about your funds."

He shook his head. "I'm sorry about the mood."

Oh. "It's okay. You're famous for that."

"I am?"

"Yep. It's kind of your thing."

“Is that so?”

“Mmm.”

His mouth twitched. “Maybe I wanted to spare you.”

Olive smiled, because it was actually a nice thing to say. And he was not a nice person, but he was very kind to her most of the time—if not always. He was almost smiling back, staring down at her in a way that she couldn’t quite interpret but that made her think weird thoughts, until the barista deposited their drinks on the counter. He suddenly looked like he was about to retch.

“Adam? Are you okay?”

He stared at her cup and took a step back. “The *smell* of that thing.”

Olive inhaled deeply. Heaven. “You hate pumpkin spice latte?”

He wrinkled his nose, moving even farther away. “Gross.”

“How can you hate it? It’s the best thing your country has produced in the past century.”

“Please, stand back. The stench.”

“Hey. If I have to choose between you and pumpkin spice latte, maybe we should rethink our arrangement.”

He eyed her cup like it contained radioactive waste. “Maybe we should.”

He held the door open for her as they exited the coffee shop, taking care not to come too close to her drink. Outside it was starting to drizzle. Students were hastily packing up their laptops and notebooks from the patio tables to head to class or move to the library. Olive had been in love with the rain since as far back as she could remember. She inhaled deeply and filled her lungs with petrichor, stopping with Adam under the

canopy. He took a sip of his chamomile tea, and it made her smile.

"Hey," she said, "I have an idea. Are you going to the fall biosciences picnic?"

He nodded. "I have to. I'm on the biology department's social-and-networking committee."

She laughed out loud. "No way."

"Yep."

"Did you actually sign up for it?"

"It's service. I was forced to rotate into the position."

"Ah. That sounds . . . fun." She winced sympathetically, almost laughing again at his appalled expression. "Well, I'm going, too. Dr. Aslan makes us all go, says it promotes bonding among lab mates. Do you make your grads go?"

"No. I have other, more productive ways of making my grads miserable."

She chuckled. He *was* funny, in that weird, dark way of his. "I bet you do. Well, here's my idea: we should hang when we're there. In front of the department chair—since he's 'monitoring.' I'll bat my eyelashes at you; he'll see that we're basically one step away from marriage. Then he'll make a quick phone call and a truck will drive up and unload your research funds in cash right there in front of—"

"Hey, man!"

A blond man approached Adam. Olive fell silent as Adam turned to smile at him and exchanged a handshake—a *close bros* handshake. She blinked, wondering if she was seeing things, and took a sip of her latte.

"I thought you'd sleep in," Adam was saying.

“The time difference screwed me up. I figured I might as well come to campus and get to work. Something to eat, too. You have no food, man.”

“There are apples in the kitchen.”

“Right. No food.”

Olive took a step back, ready to excuse herself, when the blond man turned his attention to her. He looked eerily familiar, even though she was certain she had never met him before.

“And who’s this?” he asked curiously. His eyes were a very piercing blue.

“This is Olive,” Adam said. There was a beat after her name, in which he should have probably specified *how* he knew Olive. He did not, and she really couldn’t blame him for not wanting to feed their fake-dating crap to someone who was clearly a good friend. She just kept her smile in place and let Adam continue. “Olive, this is my collaborator—”

“Dude.” The man pretended to bristle. “Introduce me as your friend.”

Adam rolled his eyes, clearly amused. “Olive, this is my *friend* and collaborator. Dr. Tom Benton.”

Chapter Five

HYPOTHESIS: *The more I need my brain to be on top of its game, the higher the probability that it will freeze on me.*

"Wait a minute." Dr. Benton tilted his head. His smile was still in place, but his gaze became a little sharper, his focus on Olive less superficial. "Do you happen to be . . ."

Olive froze.

Her mind was never calm, or orderly—more like a garbled mess of thoughts, really. And yet, standing there in front of Tom Benton, the inside of her head went uncharacteristically quiet, and several considerations stacked themselves neatly into place.

The first was that she was comically luckless. The chances that the person she depended on to finish her beloved research project would be acquainted—no, *friends* with the person she depended on to ensure her beloved Anh's romantic happiness were laughably low. And yet. Then again, Olive's special brand of luck was no news, so she moved on to the next consideration.

She needed to admit who she was to Tom Benton. They were scheduled to meet at 3:00 p.m., and pretending not to recognize him now would mean the kiss of death to her plans to infiltrate herself into his lab. Academics had huge egos, after all.

Last consideration: if she phrased this right, she could probably avoid Dr. Benton hearing about the whole fake-dating mess. Adam hadn't mentioned it, which probably meant

that he wasn't planning to. Olive just needed to follow his lead.

Yes. Excellent plan. She had this in the bag.

Olive smiled, held on to her pumpkin spice latte, and answered, "Yes, I'm Olive Smith, the—"

"Girlfriend I've heard so much about?"

Shit. Shit, shit, *shit.* She swallowed. "Um, actually I—"

"Heard from whom?" Adam asked, frowning.

Dr. Benton shrugged. "Everyone."

"Everyone," Adam repeated. He was scowling now. "In Boston?"

"Yeah."

"Why are people at Harvard talking about my girlfriend?"

"Because you're you."

"Because I'm *me*?" Adam looked perplexed.

"There have been tears. Some hair-pulling. A few broken hearts. Don't worry, they'll get over it."

Adam rolled his eyes, and Dr. Benton returned his attention to Olive. He smiled at her, offering his hand. "It's very nice to meet you. I had written off the whole girlfriend thing as rumors, but I'm glad you . . . exist. Sorry, I didn't catch your name—I'm terrible at names."

"I'm Olive." She shook his hand. He had a nice grip, not too tight and not too soft.

"Which department do you teach, Olive?"

Oh, crap. "Actually, I don't. Teach, that is."

"Oh, sorry. I didn't mean to assume." He smiled, apologetic and self-effacing. There was a smooth charm to him. He was young to be a professor, though not as young as

Adam. And he was tall, though not as tall as Adam. And he was handsome, though . . . yeah. Not as handsome as Adam.

"What do you do, then? Are you a research fellow?"

"Um, I actually—"

"She's a student," Adam said.

Dr. Benton's eyes widened.

"A *graduate* student," Adam clarified. There was a hint of warning in his tone, like he really wanted Dr. Benton to drop the subject.

Dr. Benton, naturally, did not. "*Your* graduate student?"

Adam frowned. "No, of course she's not my—"

This was the perfect opening. "Actually, Dr. Benton, I work with Dr. Aslan." Maybe this meeting was still salvageable. "You probably don't recognize my name, but we've corresponded. We're supposed to meet today. I'm the student who's working on the pancreatic cancer biomarkers. The one who asked to come work in your lab for a year."

Dr. Benton's eyes widened even more, and he muttered something that sounded a lot like "*What the hell?*" Then his face stretched into a wide, openmouthed grin. "Adam, you *absolute ass*. You didn't even tell me."

"I didn't know," Adam muttered. His gaze was fixed on Olive.

"How could you not know that your girlfriend—"

"I didn't tell Adam, because I didn't know you two were friends," Olive interjected. And then she thought that maybe it wasn't quite believable. If Olive really were Adam's girlfriend, he'd have told her about his friends. Since, in a shocking plot twist, he did appear to have at least one.

“That is, I, um . . . never put two and two together, and didn’t know that you were the Tom he always talked about.” There, better. Kind of. “I’m sorry, Dr. Benton. I didn’t mean to —”

“Tom,” he said, grin still in place. His shock seemed to be settling into pleasant surprise. “Please, call me Tom.” His eyes darted between Adam and Olive for a few seconds. Then he said, “Hey, are you free?” He pointed at the coffee shop. “Why don’t we go inside and chat about your project now? No point in waiting until this afternoon.”

She took a sip of her latte to temporize. Was she free? Technically, yes. She would have loved to run to the edge of campus and scream into the void until modern civilization collapsed, but that wasn’t exactly a pressing matter. And she wanted to look as accommodating as possible to Dr. Benton—Tom. Beggars and choosers and all that.

“I’m free.”

“Great. You, Adam?”

Olive froze. And so did Adam, for about a second, before pointing out, “I don’t think I should be present, if you’re about to interview her—”

“Oh, it’s not an interview. Just an informal chat to see if Olive’s and my research match. You’ll want to know if your girlfriend is moving to Boston for a year, right? Come on.” He motioned for them to follow him and then stepped inside the Starbucks.

Olive and Adam exchanged a silent look that somehow managed to speak volumes. It said, *What the hell do we do?* and *How the hell would I know?* and *This is going to be weird*, and *No, it’s going to be plain bad.* Then Adam sighed, put on a resigned face, and headed inside. Olive followed him, regretting her life choices.

“Aslan’s retiring, huh?” Tom asked after they’d found a secluded table in the back. Olive had no choice but to sit across from him—and on Adam’s left. Like a good “girlfriend,” she supposed. Her “boyfriend,” in the meantime, was sullenly sipping his chamomile tea next to her. *I should snap a picture*, she reflected. *He’d make for an excellent viral meme.*

“In the next few years,” Olive confirmed. She loved her adviser, who had always been supportive and encouraging. Since the very beginning she had given Olive the freedom to develop her own research program, which was almost unheard of for Ph.D. students. Having a hands-off mentor was great when it came to pursuing her interests, but . . .

“If Aslan’s retiring soon, she’s not applying for grants anymore—understandable, since she won’t be around long enough to see the projects through—which means that your lab is not exactly flush with cash right now,” Tom summarized perfectly. “Okay, tell me about your project. What’s cool about it?”

“I . . . ,” Olive began—she scrambled to collect her thoughts. “So, it’s—” Another pause. Longer this time, and more painfully awkward. “Um . . .”

This, precisely, was her problem. Olive knew that she was an excellent scientist, that she had the discipline and the critical-thinking skills to produce good work in the lab. Unfortunately succeeding in academia also required the ability to pitch one’s work, sell it to strangers, present it in public, and . . . *that* was not something she enjoyed or excelled at. It made her feel panicky and judged, as though pinned to a microscope slide, and her ability to produce syntactically coherent sentences invariably leaked out of her brain.

Like right now. Olive felt her cheeks heat and her tongue tie and—

“What kind of question is that?” Adam interjected.

When she glanced at him, he was scowling at Tom, who just shrugged.

“What’s *cool* about your project?” Adam repeated back.

“Yeah. Cool. You know what I mean.”

“I don’t think I do, and maybe neither does Olive.”

Tom huffed. “Fine, what would *you* ask?”

Adam turned to Olive. His knee brushed her leg, warm and oddly reassuring through her jeans. “What issues does your project target? Why do you think it’s significant? What gaps in the literature does it fill? What techniques are you using? What challenges do you foresee?”

Tom huffed. “Right, sure. Consider all those long, boring questions asked, Olive.”

She glanced at Adam, finding that he was studying her with a calm, encouraging expression. The way he’d formulated the questions helped her reorganize her thoughts, and realizing that she had answers for each one melted most of her panic. It probably hadn’t been intentional on Adam’s part, but he’d done her a solid.

Olive was reminded of that guy from the bathroom, from years ago. *I have no idea if you’re good enough*, he’d told her. *What matters is whether your* reason *to be in academia is good enough*. He’d said that Olive’s reason was the best one, and therefore, she could do this. She *needed* to do this.

“Okay,” she started again after a deep breath, gathering what she’d rehearsed the previous night with Malcolm. “Here’s the deal. Pancreatic cancer is very aggressive and deadly. It has very poor prognosis, with only one out of four people alive a year after diagnosis.” Her voice, she thought, sounded less breathy and more self-assured. Good. “The

problem is that it's so hard to detect, we are only able to diagnose it very late in the game. At that point, the cancer has already spread so widely, most treatments can't do much to counteract it. But if diagnosis were faster—"

"People could get treatment sooner and have a higher chance of survival," Tom said, nodding a bit impatiently. "Yep, I'm well aware. We already have some screening tools, though. Like imaging."

She wasn't surprised he brought it up, since imaging was what Tom's lab focused on. "Yes, but that's expensive, time-consuming, and often not useful because of the pancreas's position. But . . ." She took another deep breath. "I think I have found a set of biomarkers. Not from tissue biopsy—blood biomarkers. Noninvasive, easy to obtain. Cheap. In mice they can detect pancreatic cancer as early as stage one."

She paused. Tom and Adam were both staring at her. Tom was clearly interested, and Adam looked . . . a little weird, to be honest. Impressed, maybe? Nah, impossible.

"Okay. This sounds promising. What's the next step?"

"Collecting more data. Running more analyses with better equipment to prove that my set of biomarkers is worthy of a clinical trial. But for that I need a larger lab."

"I see." He nodded with a thoughtful expression and then leaned back in his chair. "Why pancreatic cancer?"

"It's one of the most lethal, and we know so little about how—"

"No," Tom interrupted. "Most third-year Ph.D. students are too busy infighting over the centrifuge to come up with their own line of research. There must be a reason you're so motivated. Did someone close to you have cancer?"

Olive swallowed before reluctantly answering, "Yes."

“Who?”

“Tom,” Adam said, a trace of warning in his voice. His knee was still against her thigh. Still warm. And yet, Olive felt her blood turn cold. She really, really didn’t want to say it. And yet she couldn’t ignore the question. She needed Tom’s help.

“My mother.”

Okay. It was out there now. She’d said it, and she could go back to trying not to think about it—

“Did she die?”

A beat. Olive hesitated and then nodded silently, not looking at either of the men at the table. She knew Tom wasn’t trying to be mean—people were curious, after all. But it wasn’t something Olive wanted to discuss. She barely ever talked about it, even with Anh and Malcolm, and she had carefully avoided writing about her experience in her grad school applications, even when everyone had told her it would give her a leg up.

She just . . . She couldn’t. She just couldn’t.

“How old were you—”

“*Tom*,” Adam interrupted, tone sharp. He set his tea down with more force than necessary. “Stop harassing my girlfriend.” It was less of a warning and more of a threat.

“Right. Yes. I’m an insensitive ass.” Tom smiled, apologetic.

Olive noticed that he was looking at her shoulder. When she followed his gaze, she realized that Adam had placed his arm on the back of her chair. He wasn’t touching her, but there was something . . . protective about his position. He seemed to generate large amounts of heat, which was not at all

unwelcome. It helped melt the yucky feeling the conversation with Tom had left behind.

"Then again, so is your boyfriend." Tom winked at her. "Okay, Olive. Tell you what." Tom leaned forward, elbows on the table. "I've read your paper. And the abstract you submitted to the SBD conference. Are you still planning to go?"

"If it's accepted."

"I'm sure it will be. It's excellent work. But it sounds like your project has progressed since you submitted that, and I need to know more about it. If I decide that you can work in my lab next year, I'll cover you completely—salary, supplies, equipment, whatever you need. But I need to know where you're at to make sure that you're worth investing in."

Olive felt her heart racing. This sounded promising. Very promising.

"Here's the deal. I'm going to give you two weeks to write up a report on everything you've been doing so far—protocols, findings, challenges. In two weeks, send me the report and I'll make a decision based on it. Does that sound feasible?"

She grinned, nodding enthusiastically. "Yes!" She could absolutely do that. She'd need to pull the intro from one of her papers, the methods from her lab protocols, the preliminary data from that grant she'd applied for and not won. And she'd have to rerun some of her analyses—just to make sure that the report was absolutely flawless for Tom. It would be lots of work in little time, but who needed sleep? Or bathroom breaks?

"Great. In the meantime I'll see you around and we can chat more. Adam and I will be joined at the hip for a couple of weeks, since we're working on that grant we just got. Are you coming to my talk tomorrow?"

Olive had no idea he was giving a talk, let alone when or where, but she said "Of course! Can't wait!" with the certainty of someone who had installed a countdown widget on her smartphone.

"And I'm staying with Adam, so I'll see you at his place."

Oh no. "Um . . ." She risked a glance at Adam, who was unreadable. "Sure. Though we usually meet at my place, so . . ."

"I see. You disapprove of his taxidermy collection, don't you?" Tom stood with a smirk. "Excuse me. I'll get some coffee and be right back."

The second he was gone, Olive instantly turned to Adam. Now that they were alone there were about ten million topics for them to debrief on, but the only thing she could think of was, "Do you really collect taxidermied animals?"

He gave her a scathing look and took his arm away from around her shoulders. She felt cold all of a sudden. Bereft.

"I'm sorry. I had no idea he was your friend, or that you two had a grant together. You do such different research, the possibility didn't even cross my mind."

"You did mention that you don't believe cancer researchers can benefit from collaborating with computational modelists."

"You—" She noticed the way his mouth was twitching and wondered when exactly they'd gotten on teasing terms. "How do you two know each other?"

"He was a postdoc in my lab, back when I was a Ph.D. student. We've kept in touch and collaborated through the years."

So he must be four or five years older than Adam.

"You went to Harvard, right?"

He nodded, and a terrifying thought occurred to her. “What if he feels obliged to take me on because I’m your fake girlfriend?”

“Tom won’t. He once fired his cousin for breaking a flow cytometer. He’s not exactly tenderhearted.”

Takes one to know one, she thought. “Listen, I’m sorry this is forcing you to lie to your friend. If you want to tell him that this is fake . . .”

Adam shook his head. “If I did, I’d never live it down.”

She let out a laugh. “Yeah, I can see that. And honestly it wouldn’t reflect well on me, either.”

“But, Olive, if you do end up deciding that you want to go to Harvard, I’ll need you to keep it a secret until the end of September.”

She gasped, realizing the implications of his words. “Of course. If people know that I’m leaving, the department chair will never believe that you’re not leaving, too. I hadn’t even thought of it. I promise I won’t tell anyone! Well, except for Malcolm and Anh, but they’re great at keeping secrets, they’d never—”

His eyebrow rose. Olive winced.

“I will *make* them keep this secret. I swear.”

“I appreciate it.”

She noticed that Tom was on his way back to the table and leaned closer to Adam to quickly whisper, “One more thing. The talk he mentioned, the one he’s giving tomorrow?”

“The one you ‘can’t wait’ for?”

Olive bit the inside of her cheek. “Yes. When and where is it going to be?”

Adam laughed silently just as Tom sat down again. “Don’t worry. I’ll email you the details.”

Chapter Six

HYPOTHESIS: *When compared with multiple types and models of furniture, Adam Carlsen's lap will be rated in the top fifth percentile for comfort, coziness, and enjoyment.*

The moment Olive opened the door of the auditorium she and Anh exchanged a wide-eyed look and said, in unison, "Holy shit."

In her two years at Stanford she had been to countless seminars, trainings, lectures, and classes in this lecture hall, and yet she'd never seen the room this full. Maybe Tom was giving out free beer?

"I think they made the talk mandatory for immunology and pharmacology," Anh said. "And I overheard at least five people in the hallway saying that Benton is 'a known science hottie.'" She stared critically at the podium, where Tom was chatting with Dr. Moss from immunology. "I guess he's cute. Though not nearly as cute as Jeremy."

Olive smiled. The air in the room was hot and humid, smelling like sweat and too many human beings. "You don't have to stay. This is probably a fire hazard and not even remotely relevant to your research—"

"It beats doing actual work." She grabbed Olive's wrist, pulling her through the throng of grads and postdocs crowding the entrance and down the stairs on the side. They were just as packed. "And if this guy is going to take you away from me and to Boston for an entire year, I want to make sure that he deserves you." She winked. "Consider my presence the

equivalent of a father cleaning his rifle in front of his daughter's boyfriend before prom."

"Aww, Daddy."

There was nowhere to sit, of course, not even on the floor or on the steps. Olive spotted Adam in an aisle seat a few meters away. He was back to his usual black Henley and deep in conversation with Holden Rodrigues. When Adam's eyes met Olive's, she grinned and waved at him. For some yet unknown reason that likely had to do with the fact that they were sharing this huge, ridiculous, unlikely secret, Adam now felt like a friendly face. He didn't wave back, but his gaze seemed softer and warmer, and his mouth curved into that tilt that she'd learned to recognize as his version of a smile.

"I can't believe they didn't switch the talk to one of the bigger auditoriums. There is not nearly enough space for—Oh, *no*. No, no, no."

Olive followed Anh's gaze, and saw at least twenty new people arrive. The crowd immediately started pushing Olive toward the front of the room. Anh yelped when a first-year from neuroscience who weighed about four times as much as she did stepped on her toe. "This is ridiculous."

"I know. I can't believe more people are—"

Olive's hip bumped against something—someone. She turned to apologize, and—it was Adam. Or, Adam's shoulder. He was still chatting with Dr. Rodrigues, who wore a displeased expression and was muttering, "Why are we even here?"

"Because he's a friend," Adam said.

"Not *my* friend."

Adam sighed and turned to look at Olive.

“Hey—sorry.” She gestured in the direction of the entrance. “A bunch of new people just came in and apparently the space in this room is finite. I think it’s a law of physics, or something.”

“It’s okay.”

“I’d take a step back, but . . .”

On the podium, Dr. Moss took the mic and began introducing Tom.

“Here,” Adam told Olive, making to stand from his chair. “Take my seat.”

“Oh.” It was nice of him to offer. Not fake-dating-to-save-her-ass, spend-twenty-bucks-on-junk-food-for-her nice, but still very nice. Olive couldn’t possibly accept. Plus, Adam was a professor, which meant that he was older and all that. Thirtysomething. He did look fit, but he probably had a bum knee and was only a few years short of osteoporosis. “Thank you, but—”

“Actually, that would be a terrible idea,” Anh interjected. Her eyes were darting between Olive and Adam. “No offense, Dr. Carlsen, but you’re three times larger than Olive. If you stand, the room’s going to burst.”

Adam stared at Anh like he had no idea whether he’d just been insulted.

“But,” she continued, this time looking at Olive, “it’d be great if you could do me a solid and sit on your boyfriend’s lap, Ol. Just so I don’t have to stand on my toes?”

Olive blinked. And then she blinked again. And then she blinked some more. Near the podium, Dr. Moss was still introducing Tom—“Got his Ph.D. from Vanderbilt and then moved to a postdoctoral fellowship at Harvard University, where he pioneered several techniques in the field of imaging”—but her voice sounded as if it was coming from far,

far away. Possibly because Olive couldn't stop thinking about what Anh had proposed, which was just . . .

"Anh, I don't think it's a good idea," Olive mumbled under her breath, avoiding glancing in Adam's direction.

Anh gave her a look. "Why? You're taking up space we don't have, and it's only logical that you use Carlsen as a chair. I would, but he's your boyfriend, not mine."

For a moment, Olive tried to imagine what Adam would do if Anh decided to sit on his lap, and figured that it would probably end up involving someone being murdered and someone doing the murdering—she wasn't sure who'd be doing what. The mental image was so ridiculous that she almost giggled out loud. Then she noticed the way Anh was looking at her expectantly. "Anh, I *can't*."

"Why?"

"*Because*. This is a scientific talk."

"Psh. Remember last year, when Jess and Alex made out for half of that CRISPR lecture?"

"I do—and it was *weird*."

"Nah, it wasn't. Also, Malcolm swears that during a seminar he saw that tall guy from immunology get a hand job from—"

"*Anh*."

"The point is, no one cares." Anh's expression softened into a plea. "And this girl's elbow is puncturing my right lung, and I have about thirty seconds of air left. Please, Olive."

Olive turned to face Adam. Who was, very unsurprisingly, looking up at her with that nonexpression of his, the one that Olive couldn't quite decipher. Except that his jaw was working, and she wondered if maybe this was it. The last straw. The moment he backed out of their arrangement.

Because millions of dollars in research funds couldn't be worth having some girl he barely knew sit on his lap in the most crowded room in the history of crowded rooms.

Is this okay? she tried to ask him with her eyes. *Because maybe this is a little too much. Way more than saying hi to each other and having coffee together.*

He gave her a brief nod, and then—Olive, or at least Olive's body, was stepping toward Adam and gingerly sitting on his thigh, her knees tucked between his spread legs. It was happening. It had happened already. Olive was here.

Sitting.

On.

Adam.

This. Yep, *this*.

This was her life now.

She was going to murder Anh for this. Slowly. Maybe painfully, too. She was going to be jailed for bestfriendicide, and she was a-okay with it.

"I'm sorry," she whispered to Adam. He was so tall, her mouth was not quite level with his ear. She could smell him—the woodsiness of his shampoo, his body wash, and something else underneath, dark and good and clean. It all felt familiar, and after a few seconds Olive realized that it was because of the last time they had been this close. Because of The Night. Because of the kiss. "So, *so* sorry."

He didn't immediately answer. His jaw tensed, and he looked in the direction of the PowerPoint. Dr. Moss was gone, Tom was talking about cancer diagnostics, and Olive would have gobbled this up on a regular day, but right now she just needed *out*. Of the talk. Of the room. Of her own life.

Then Adam turned his face a little and told her, “It’s okay.” He sounded a bit strained. Like nothing about this situation was, in fact, okay.

“I’m sorry. I had no idea she would suggest this, and I couldn’t think of a way to—”

“Sssh.” His arm slid around her waist, his hand coming to rest on her hip in a gesture that should have been unpleasant but just felt reassuring. His voice was low when he added, “It’s fine.” The words vibrated in her ear, rich and warm. “More material for my Title IX complaint.”

Shit. “God, I’m so sorry—”

“Olive.”

She lifted her eyes to catch his and was shocked to find him . . . not smiling, but something like it.

“I was kidding. You weigh nothing. I don’t mind.”

“I—”

“Ssh. Just focus on the talk. Tom might ask you questions about it.”

This was just . . . Seriously, this whole business, it was completely, *utterly* . . .

Comfortable. Adam Carlsen’s lap was one of the most comfortable places on earth, as it turned out. He was warm and solid in a pleasant, soothing way, and he didn’t seem to mind too much having Olive half draped over him. After a short while she realized that the room was truly too full for anyone to be paying attention to them, except for a quick glance from Holden Rodrigues, who studied Adam for a long moment and then smiled warmly at Olive before focusing on the talk. She stopped pretending to be able to hold her spine upright for more than five minutes and just let herself lean into Adam’s

torso. He didn't say anything but angled himself a little, just to help her fit more comfortably.

Somewhere halfway through the talk she realized that she had been sliding down Adam's thigh. Or, to be fair, Adam realized and lifted her up, straightening her in a firm, quick pull that made her feel like she really didn't weigh anything. Once she was stable again, he didn't move his arm from where it was snaked around her waist. The talk had been happening for thirty-five minutes going on a century, so no one could blame Olive if she sank into him a little bit more.

It was fine. It was more than fine, actually. It was nice.

"Don't fall asleep," he murmured. She felt his lips move against the tendrils of hair above her temple. It should have been Olive's cue to straighten, but she couldn't quite make herself.

"I'm not. Though you're so comfy."

His fingers tightened on her, maybe to wake her up, maybe to hold her closer. She was about to melt off the chair and start snoring.

"You look like you're about to take a nap."

"It's just that I've read all of Tom's articles. I already know what he's saying."

"Yeah, same. We cited all this stuff in our grant proposal." He sighed, and she felt his body move under hers. "This is dull."

"Maybe you should ask a question. To liven this up."

Adam turned slightly to her. "Me?"

She angled her head to speak in his ear. "I'm sure you can come up with something. Just raise your hand and make a mean observation with that tone of yours. Glare at him. It might devolve into an entertaining outbreak of fisticuffs."

His cheek curved. “You are such a smart-ass.”

Olive looked back to the slides, smiling. “Has it been weird? Having to lie to Tom about us?”

Adam seemed to think about it. “No.” He hesitated. “It looks like your friends are buying that we’re together.”

“I think so. I’m not exactly a convincing liar, and sometimes I worry that Anh might get suspicious. But I walked in on her and Jeremy making out in the grad lounge the other day.”

They fell quiet and listened to the last few minutes of the talk in silence. In front of them, Olive could see at least two professors taking a nap, and several surreptitiously working on their laptops. Next to Adam, Dr. Rodrigues had been playing Candy Crush on his phone for the past half an hour. Some people had left, and Anh had found a seat about ten minutes ago. So had several of the students who had been next to Olive, which meant that she could have technically stood up and left Adam alone. Technically. Technically, there was an open chair somewhere in the third-to-last row. Technically.

Instead she brought her lips to Adam’s ear once more and whispered, “It’s working out well for me, I have to say. This whole fake-dating thing.” More than well. Better than she ever thought it would.

Adam blinked once and then nodded. Maybe his arm tensed a little around her. Maybe it didn’t, and Olive’s mind was playing tricks on her. It was starting to get late, after all. Her last coffee had been too long ago, and she wasn’t fully awake, her thoughts fuzzy and relaxed.

“What about you?”

“Mmm?” Adam wasn’t looking at her.

“Is it working for you?” It came out a little needy. Olive told herself that it was only because of how low she had to

pitch her voice. “Or do you maybe want to fake–break up early?”

He didn’t reply for a second. Then, just as Dr. Moss took the mic to thank Tom and ask the audience for questions, she heard him say, “No. I don’t want to fake–break up.”

He really did smell good. And he was funny in a weird, deadpan way, and yes, a known ass, but friendly enough to her that she could sort of ignore that about him. Plus, he was spending a small fortune on sugar for her. Truly, she had nothing to complain about.

Olive settled herself more comfortably and turned her attention back to the podium.

AFTER THE TALK, Olive considered walking down to the podium to compliment Tom and ask him one or two questions she already knew the answers to. Sadly, there were dozens of people waiting to speak to him, and she decided that the ass-kissing wasn’t worth standing in line. So she said goodbye to Adam, waited for Anh to wake up from her nap while contemplating getting revenge by drawing a dick on her face, and then slowly headed with her across campus back to the biology building.

“Is it going to be a lot of work, the report Benton asked for?”

“A fair amount. I need to run a few control studies to make my results stronger. Plus there’s other stuff I should be working on—the TA’ing, and my poster presentation for the SBD conference in Boston.” Olive bent her head back, felt the sun warm her skin, and smiled. “If I hole up in the lab every night this week and the next, I should be able to finish it on time.”

“SBD is something to look forward to, at least.”

Olive nodded. She usually wasn’t a fan of academic conferences, given how prohibitively expensive registration, travel, and lodgings could be. But Malcolm and Anh were going to be at SBD, too, and Olive was excited to explore Boston with them. Plus, the intradepartmental drama that always happened at academic functions with open bars was sure to be A+ entertainment.

“I am organizing this outreach event for BIPOC women in STEM from all over the country—I’m going to get Ph.D. students like me to talk face-to-face with undergrads who are applying and reassure them that if they come to grad school they won’t be alone.”

“Anh, this is amazing. *You* are amazing.”

“I know.” Anh winked, sliding her arm through Olive’s. “We can all share a hotel room. And get free gadgets from the exhibit booths, and get sloshed together. Remember at Human Genetics, when Malcolm got wasted and began hitting random passersby with his poster tube— What’s going on there?”

Olive squinted against the sun. The parking lot of the biology building was uncharacteristically jammed with traffic. People were blowing their horns and getting out of their cars, trying to figure out the source of the holdup. She and Anh walked around a line of vehicles stuck in the lot, until they ran into a group of biology grads.

“Someone’s battery died, and it’s blocking the exit line.” Greg, one of Olive’s lab mates, was rolling his eyes and bouncing impatiently on his feet. He pointed at a red truck stuck sideways in the most inconvenient turn.

Olive recognized it as Cherie’s, the department secretary.

“I defend my dissertation proposal tomorrow—I need to drive home to prepare. This is ridiculous. And why the fuck is

Cherie just standing there, chatting leisurely with Carlsen? Do they want us to bring them tea and cucumber sandwiches?"

Olive looked around, searching for Adam's tall frame.

"Oh yeah, there's Carlsen," Anh said. Olive looked where she was pointing, just in time to see Cherie get back behind the wheel and Adam jogging around the truck.

"What is he—" was all Olive managed to say, before he came to a stop, put his hands on the back of the truck in neutral, and started . . .

Pushing.

His shoulders and biceps strained his Henley. The firm muscles of his upper back visibly shifted and tensed under the black fabric as he bent forward and rolled several tons of truck across . . . quite a bit of a distance and into the closest empty parking space.

Oh.

There was some applause and whistling from bystanders when the truck was out of the way, and a couple of faculty members from neuroscience clapped Adam on the shoulder as the line of cars started driving out of the lot.

"Fucking finally," Olive heard Greg say from behind her, and she stood there, blinking, a little shocked. Had she hallucinated it? Had Adam really just pushed a giant truck all by himself? Was he an alien from planet Krypton who moonlighted as a superhero?

"Ol, go give him a kiss."

Olive whirled around, abruptly reminded of Anh's existence. "What?" No. *No.* "I'm good. I just said goodbye to him a minute ago and—"

"Ol, why don't you want to go kiss your boyfriend?"

Ugh. "I . . . It's not that I don't want to. I just—"

“Dude, he just moved a truck. By himself. On uphill ground. He deserves a damn kiss.” Anh shoved Olive and made a shooing motion.

Olive clenched her teeth and headed in Adam’s direction, wishing she’d gone ahead and drawn twenty dicks all over Anh’s face. Maybe she did suspect that Olive was faking her relationship with Adam. Or maybe she just got a kick out of pressuring her into PDA’ing, that ingrate. Either way, if this was what one got for masterminding an intricate fake-dating scheme that was supposed to benefit a friend’s love life, then maybe—

Olive halted abruptly.

Adam’s head was bent forward, black hair covering his forehead as he wiped the sweat from his eyes with the hem of his shirt. It left a broad strip of flesh visible on his torso, and—it was nothing indecent, really, nothing unusual, just some fit guy’s midriff, but for some reason Olive couldn’t help staring at Adam Carlsen’s uncovered skin like it was a slab of Italian marble, and—

“Olive?” he said, and she immediately averted her eyes. Crap, he’d totally caught her staring. First she’d forced him to kiss her, and now she was ogling him like some perv in the biology parking lot and—

“Did you need anything?”

“No, I . . .” She felt her cheeks go crimson.

His skin, too, was flushed from the effort of pushing, and his eyes were bright and clear, and he seemed . . . well, at least he didn’t seem unhappy to see her.

“Anh sent me to give you a kiss.”

He froze halfway through wiping his hands on his shirt. And then he said “Ah” in his usual neutral, unreadable tone.

“Because you moved the truck. I—I know how ridiculous that sounds. I know. But I didn’t want her to get suspicious, and there are faculty members here, too, so maybe they’ll tell the department chair and it will be two birds with one stone and I can leave if you—”

“It’s okay, Olive. Breathe.”

Right. Yes. Good suggestion. Olive did breathe, and the act made her realize that she hadn’t done that in a while, which in turn made her smile up at Adam—who did his mouth-twitch thing back at her. She was really starting to get used to him. To his expressions, his size, his distinctive way of being in the same space as her.

“Anh’s staring at us,” he said, looking over Olive’s head.

Olive sighed and pinched the bridge of her nose. “I just bet she is,” she mumbled.

Adam wiped sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand.

Olive squirmed. “So . . . Should we hug or something?”

“Oh.” Adam looked at his hands and down at himself. “I don’t think you want to do that. I’m pretty gross.”

Before she could stop herself Olive studied him from head to toe, taking in his large body, his broad shoulders, the way his hair was curling around his ears. He didn’t *look* gross. Not even to Olive, who was usually not a fan of dudes built like they spent a double-digit percentage of their time at the gym. He looked . . .

Not gross.

Still, maybe it was better if they didn’t hug. Olive might end up doing something egregiously stupid. She should just say goodbye and leave—yes, that was the thing to do.

Except that something absolutely insane came out of her mouth.

"Should we just kiss, then?" she heard herself blurt out. And then she instantly wished a stray meteorite would hit the exact spot where she was standing, because—had she just asked Adam Carlsen for a kiss? Was that what she'd done? Was she a lunatic all of a sudden?

"I mean, not like a *kiss* kiss," she hastened to add. "But like the last time? You know."

He didn't seem to know. Which made sense, because their other kiss had definitely been a *kiss* kiss. Olive tried not to think about it too much, but it flashed in her mind every once in a while, mostly when she was doing something important that required her utmost concentration, like implanting electrodes inside a mouse's pancreas or trying to decide what to order at Subway. Occasionally it would pop up during a quiet moment, like when she was in bed and about to fall asleep, and she would feel a mixture of embarrassment and incredulity and something else. Something that she had no intention of examining too closely, not now and not ever.

"Are you sure?"

She nodded, even though she wasn't sure at all. "Is Anh still staring at us?"

His eyes flicked up. "Yes. She's not even pretending not to. I . . . why does she care so much? Are you famous?"

"No, Adam." She gestured at him. "*You* are."

"Am I?" He looked perplexed.

"Anyway, no need to kiss. You're right that it would probably be a bit weird."

"No. No, I didn't mean that . . ." There was a droplet of sweat running down his temple, and he wiped his face again,

this time with the sleeve of his shirt. “We can kiss.”

“Oh.”

“If you think that . . . If your friend is watching.”

“Yeah.” Olive swallowed. “But we don’t have to.”

“I know.”

“Unless you want to.” Olive’s palms felt damp and clammy, so she surreptitiously wiped them on her jeans. “And by ‘want to’ I mean, unless you think it’s a good idea.” It so was *not* a good idea. It was a horrible idea. Like *all* her ideas.

“Right.” He looked past Olive and toward Anh, who was probably in the middle of doing an entire Instagram Story on them. “Okay, then.”

“Okay.”

He stepped a little closer, and really, he was not gross. How someone this sweaty, someone who’d just pushed a truck, still managed to smell good was a topic worthy of a Ph.D. dissertation, for sure. Earth’s finest scientists should have been hard at work on this.

“Why don’t I . . .” Olive inched slightly into him, and after letting her hand hover for a moment she rested it over Adam’s shoulder. She pushed up on her toes, angling her head up toward him. It helped very little, as Olive was still not tall enough to reach his mouth, so she tried to get more leverage by putting her other hand on his arm, and immediately realized that she was basically hugging him. Which was the exact thing he had asked her not to do a second ago. *Crap*.

“Sorry, too close? I didn’t mean to—”

She would have finished the sentence, if he hadn’t closed the distance between them and just—kissed her. Just like that.

It was little more than a peck—just his lips pressing against hers, and his hand on her waist to steady her a little. It was a

kiss, but barely, and it certainly didn't warrant the way her heart pounded in her chest, or the fact that there was something warm and liquid looping at the bottom of her belly. Not unpleasant, but confusing and a bit scary nonetheless, and it had Olive pull back after only a second. When she eased back on her heels, it seemed like for a fraction of a moment Adam followed her, trying to fill the gap between their mouths. Though by the time she'd blinked herself free of the haze of the kiss, he was standing tall in front of her, cheekbones dusted with red and chest moving up and down in shallow breaths. She must have dreamed up that last bit.

She needed to avert her eyes from him, now. And he needed to look elsewhere, too. Why were they staring at each other?

"Okay," she chirped. "That, um . . . worked."

Adam's jaw twitched, but he didn't reply.

"Well, then. I'm going to . . . um . . ." She gestured behind her shoulders with her thumb.

"Anh?"

"Yeah. Yeah, to Anh."

He swallowed heavily. "Okay. Yeah."

They had kissed. They had kissed—twice, now. *Twice*. Not that it mattered. No one cared. But. Twice. Plus, the lap. Earlier today. Again, not that it mattered.

"I'll see you around, right? Next week?"

He lifted his fingers to his lips, then let his arm drop to his side. "Yes. On Wednesday."

It was Thursday now. Which meant that they were going to see each other in six days. Which was fine. Olive was fine, no matter when or how often they met. "Yep. See you Wed—Hey, what about the picnic?"

“The— Oh.” Adam rolled his eyes, looking a little more like himself. “Right. That fu—” He stopped short. “That picnic.”

She grinned. “It’s on Monday.”

He sighed. “I know.”

“You’re still going?”

He gave her a look that clearly stated: *It’s not like I have a choice, even though I’d rather have my nails extracted one by one. With pliers.*

Olive laughed. “Well. I’m going, too.”

“At least there’s that.”

“Are you bringing Tom?”

“Probably. He actually *likes* people.”

“Okay. I can network with him a bit, and you and I can show off how steady and committed we are to the department chair. You’ll look like a wingless bird. No flight risk whatsoever.”

“Perfect. I’ll bring a counterfeit marriage license to casually drop at his feet.”

Olive laughed, waved goodbye, and then jogged up to Anh. She rubbed the side of her hand against her lips, as if trying to scrub her mind clean of the fact that she had just kissed Adam —Dr. Adam Carlsen—for the second time in her life. Which, again, was fine. It had been barely a kiss. Not important.

“Well, then,” Anh said, tucking her phone into her pocket. “You really just made out in front of the biology building with associate professor Adam MacArthur Carlsen.”

Olive rolled her eyes and started up the stairs. “I’m pretty sure that’s not his middle name. And we did not.”

“But it was clear that you wanted to.”

“Shut up. Why were you looking at us, anyway?”

“I wasn’t. I happened to glance up when he was about to jump you, and I just couldn’t look away.”

Olive snorted, plugging her headphones into her phone’s port. “Right. Of course.”

“He’s really into you. I can tell from the way he stares at __”

“I’m gonna listen to music very loudly now. To tune you out.”

“—you.”

It wasn’t until much later, after Olive had been working on Tom’s report for several hours, that she remembered what Adam had said when she’d told him she’d be at the picnic.

At least there’s that.

Olive ducked her head and smiled at her toes.

Chapter Seven

HYPOTHESIS: *There will be a significant positive correlation between the amount of sunscreen poured in my hands and the intensity of my desire to murder Anh.*

Tom's report was about a third done and sitting tight at thirty-four pages single-spaced, Arial (11 point), no justification. It was 11:00 a.m., and Olive had been working in the lab since about five—analyzing peptide samples, writing down protocol notes, taking covert naps while the PCR machine ran—when Greg barged in, looking absolutely furious.

It was unusual, but not *too* unusual. Greg was a bit of a hothead to begin with, and grad school came with a lot of angry outbursts in semipublic places, usually for reasons that, Olive was fully aware, would appear ridiculous to someone who'd never stepped foot in academia. *They're making me TA Intro to Bio for the fourth time in a row; the paper I need is behind a paywall; I had a meeting with my supervisor and accidentally called her "Mom."*

Greg and Olive shared an adviser, Dr. Aslan, and while they'd always gotten along fine, they had never been particularly close. Olive had hoped, by picking a female adviser, to avoid some of the nastiness that was so often directed at women in STEM. Unfortunately she had still found herself in an all-male lab, which was . . . a less-than-ideal environment. That was why when Greg came in, slammed the door, and then threw a folder on his bench, Olive was not sure what to do. She watched him sit down and begin to sulk. Chase, another lab mate, followed him inside a moment later

with an uneasy expression and started gingerly patting his back.

Olive looked longingly at her RNA samples. Then she stepped closer to Greg's bench and asked, "What's wrong?"

She had expected the answer to be *The production of my reagent has been discontinued*, or *My p-value is .06*, or *Grad school was a mistake, but now it's too late to back out of it because my self-worth is unbreakably tied to my academic performance, and what would even be left of me if I decided to drop out?*

Instead what she got was: "Your stupid boyfriend is what's wrong."

By now the fake dating had been going on for over two weeks: Olive didn't startle anymore when someone referred to Adam as her boyfriend. Still, Greg's words were so unexpected and full of venom that she couldn't help but answer, "Who?"

"Carlsen." He spat the name out like a curse.

"Oh."

"He's on Greg's dissertation committee," Chase explained in a significantly milder tone, not quite meeting Olive's eyes.

"Oh. Right." This could be bad. Very bad. "What happened?"

"He failed my proposal."

"Shit." Olive bit into her lower lip. "I'm sorry, Greg."

"This is going to set me back a lot. It'll take me months to revise it, all because Carlsen had to go and nitpick. I didn't even want him on my committee; Dr. Aslan forced me to add him because she's so obsessed with his stupid computational stuff."

Olive chewed on the inside of her cheek, trying to come up with something meaningful to say and failing miserably. “I’m really sorry.”

“Olive, do you guys talk about this stuff?” Chase asked out of the blue, eyeing her suspiciously. “Did he tell you he wasn’t going to pass Greg?”

“What? No. No, I . . .” *I talk to him for exactly fifteen minutes a week. And, okay, I’ve kissed him. Twice. And I sat on his lap. Once. But it’s just that, and Adam—he speaks very little. I actually wish he spoke more, since I know nothing about him, and I’d like to know at least something.* “No, he doesn’t. I think it would be against regulations if he did.”

“God.” Greg slammed his palm against the edge of the bench, making her jump. “He’s such a dick. What a sadistic piece of shit.”

Olive opened her mouth to—to do what, precisely? To defend Adam? He *was* a dick. She had seen him be a dick. In full action. Maybe not recently, and maybe not to her, but if she’d wanted to count on her fingers the number of acquaintances who’d ended up in tears because of him, well . . . She would need both her hands, and then her toes. Maybe borrow some of Chase’s, too.

“Did he say why, at least? What you have to change?”

“Everything. He wants me to change my control condition and add another one, which is going to make the project ten times more time-consuming. And the way he said it, his air of superiority—he is *so* arrogant.”

Well. It was no news, really. Olive scratched her temple, trying not to sigh. “It sucks. I’m sorry,” she repeated once more, at a loss for anything better and genuinely feeling for Greg.

“Yeah, well.” He stood and walked around his bench, coming to a stop in front of Olive. “You should be.”

She froze. Surely she must have misheard. “Excuse me?”

“You’re his girlfriend.”

“I . . .” *Really am not*. But. Even if she had been. “Greg, I’m only *dating* him. I am not him. How would I have anything to do with—”

“You’re fine with all of this. With him acting like that—like an asshole on a power trip. You don’t give a shit about the way he treats everyone in the program, otherwise you wouldn’t be able to stomach being with him.”

At his tone, she took a step back.

Chase lifted his hands in a peacekeeping gesture, coming to stand between them. “Hey, now. Let’s not—”

“I’m not the one who failed you, Greg.”

“Maybe. But you don’t care that half of the department lives in terror of your boyfriend, either.”

Olive felt anger bubbling up. “That is not true. I am able to separate my professional relationships and my personal feelings for him—”

“Because you don’t give a shit about anyone but yourself.”

“That is unfair. What am I supposed to do?”

“Get him to stop failing people.”

“Get him—” Olive sputtered. “Greg, how is this a rational response for you to have about Adam’s failing you—”

“Ah. Adam, is it?”

She gritted her teeth. “Yes. Adam. What should I call my boyfriend to better please you? Professor Carlsen?”

“If you were a half-decent ally to any of the grads in the department, you would just dump your fucking boyfriend.”

“How— Do you even realize how little sense you are . . .”

No reason to finish her sentence, since Greg was storming out of the lab and slamming the door behind him, clearly uninterested in anything Olive might have wanted to add. She ran a hand down her face, unsettled by what had just happened.

“He’s not . . . he doesn’t really mean it. Not about you, at least,” Chase said while scratching his head. A nice reminder that he’d been standing there, in the room, for the entirety of this conversation. Front-row seat. It was going to take maybe fifteen minutes before everyone in the program knew about it. “Greg needs to graduate in the spring with his wife. So that they can find postdocs together. They don’t want to live apart, you know.”

She nodded—she hadn’t known, but she could imagine. Some of her anger dissipated. “Yeah, well.” *Being horrible to me isn’t going to make his thesis work go any faster*, she didn’t add.

Chase sighed. “It’s not personal. But you have to understand that it’s weird for us. Because Carlsen . . . Maybe he wasn’t on any of your committees, but you must know the kind of guy he is, right?”

She was unsure how to respond.

“And now you guys are dating, and . . .” Chase shrugged with a nervous smile. “It shouldn’t be a matter of taking sides, but sometimes it can feel like it, you know?”

Chase’s words lingered for the rest of the day. Olive thought about them as she ran her mice through her experimental protocols, and then later while she tried to figure out what to do with those two outliers that made her findings

tricky to interpret. She mulled it over while biking home, hot wind warming her cheeks and ruffling her hair, and while eating two slices of the saddest pizza ever. Malcolm had been on a health kick for weeks now (something about cultivating his gut microbiome) and refused to admit that cauliflower crust did not taste good.

Among her friends, Malcolm and Jeremy had had unpleasant dealings with Adam in the past, but after the initial shock they didn't seem to hold Olive's relationship with him against her. She hadn't concerned herself too much with the feelings of other grads. She had always been a bit of a loner, and focusing on the opinion of people she barely interacted with seemed like a wasteful use of time and energy. Still, maybe there was a glimmer of truth in what Greg had said. Adam had been anything but a jerk to Olive, but did accepting his help while he acted horribly toward her fellow grads make her a bad person?

Olive lay on her unmade bed, looking up at the glow-in-the-dark stars. It had been more than two years since she'd borrowed Malcolm's stepladder and carefully stuck them on the ceiling; the glue was starting to give out, and the large comet in the corner by the window was going to fall off any day. Without letting herself think it through too much, she rolled out of bed and rummaged inside the pockets of her discarded jeans until she found her cell phone.

She hadn't used Adam's number since he'd given it to her a few days ago—"If anything comes up or you need to cancel, just give me a call. It's quicker than an email." When she tapped the blue icon under his name a white screen popped up, a blank slate with no history of previous messages. It gave Olive an odd rush of anxiety, so much so that she typed the text with one hand while biting the thumbnail on the other.

Olive: Did you just fail Greg?

Adam was *never* on his phone. Never. Whenever Olive had been in his company, she'd not seen him check it even once—even though with a lab as big as his he probably got about thirty new emails every minute. Truth was, she didn't even know that he owned a cell phone. Maybe he was a weird modern-day hippie and hated technology. Maybe he'd given her his office landline number, and that's why he'd told her to call him. Maybe he didn't know how to text, which meant that Olive was never going to get an answer from—

Her palm vibrated.

Adam: Olive?

It occurred to her that when Adam had given her his number, she'd neglected to give hers in return. Which meant that he had no way of knowing who was texting him now, and the fact that he'd guessed correctly revealed an almost preternatural intuition.

Damn him.

Olive: Yup. Me.

Olive: Did you fail Greg Cohen? I ran into him after his meeting. He was very upset.

At me. Because of you. Because of this stupid thing we're doing.

There was a pause of a minute or so, in which, Olive reflected, Adam might very well be cackling evilly at the idea of all the pain he'd caused Greg. Then he answered:

Adam: I can't discuss other grads' dissertation meetings with you.

Olive sighed, exchanging a loaded look with the stuffed fox Malcolm had gotten her for passing her qualifying examinations.

Olive: I'm not asking you to tell me anything. Greg already told me. Not to mention that I'm the one taking the heat for it, since I'm your girlfriend.

Olive: "Girlfriend."

Three dots appeared at the bottom of her screen. Then they disappeared, and then they appeared again, and then, finally, Olive's phone vibrated.

Adam: Committees don't fail students. They fail their proposals.

She snorted, half wishing he could hear her.

Olive: Yeah, well. Tell it to Greg.

Adam: I have. I explained the weaknesses in his study. He'll revise his proposal accordingly, and then I'll sign off on his dissertation.

Olive: So you admit that you are the one behind the decision to fail him.

Olive: Or, whatever. To fail his proposal.

Adam: Yes. In its current state, the proposal is not going to produce findings of scientific value.

Olive bit the inside of her cheek, staring at her phone and wondering if continuing this conversation was a terrible idea. If what she wanted to say was too much. Then she remembered the way Greg had treated her earlier, muttered, "Fuck it," and typed:

Olive: Don't you think that maybe you could have delivered that feedback in a nicer way?

Adam: Why?

Olive: Because if you had maybe he wouldn't be upset now?

Adam: I still don't see why.

Olive: Seriously?

Adam: It's not my job to manage your friend's emotions. He's in a Ph.D. program, not grade school. He'll be inundated by feedback he doesn't like for the rest of his life if he pursues academia. How he chooses to deal with it is his own business.

Olive: Still, maybe you could try not to look like you enjoy delaying his graduation.

Adam: This is irrational. The reason his proposal needs to be modified is that in its current state it's setting him up for failure. Me and the rest of the committee are giving him feedback that will allow him to produce useful knowledge. He is a scientist in training: he should value guidance, not be upset by it.

Olive gritted her teeth as she typed her responses.

Olive: You must know that you fail more people than anyone else. And your criticism is needlessly harsh. As in, immediately-drop-out-of-grad-school-and-never-look-back harsh. You must know how grads perceive you.

Adam: I don't.

Olive: Antagonistic. And unapproachable.

And that was sugarcoating it. *You're a dick*, Olive meant. *Except that I know you can* not *be, and I can't figure out why you're so different with me. I'm absolutely nothing to you, so it doesn't make any sense that you'd have a personality transplant every time you're in my presence.*

The three dots at the bottom of the screen bounced for ten seconds, twenty, thirty. A whole minute. Olive reread her last text and wondered if this was it—if she'd finally gone too far. Maybe he was going to remind her that being insulted over text at 9:00 p.m. on a Friday night was not part of their fake-dating agreement.

Then a blue bubble appeared, filling up her entire screen.

Adam: I'm doing my job, Olive. Which is not to deliver feedback in a pleasant way or to make the department grads feel good about themselves. My job is to form rigorous researchers who won't publish useless or harmful crap that will set back our field. Academia is cluttered with terrible science and mediocre scientists. I couldn't care less about how your friends perceive me, as long as their work is up to standard. If they want to drop out when told that it's not, then so be it. Not everyone has what it takes to be a scientist, and those who don't should be weeded out.

She stared at her phone, hating how unfeeling and callous he sounded. The problem was—Olive understood exactly where Greg was coming from, because she'd been in similar

situations. Perhaps not with Adam, but her overall experience in STEM academia had been punctuated by self-doubt, anxiety, and a sense of inferiority. She'd barely slept the two weeks before her qualifying exams, often wondered if her fear of public speaking was going to prevent her from having a career, and she was constantly terrified of being the stupidest person in the room. And yet, most of her time and energy was spent trying to be the best possible scientist, trying to carve a path for herself and amount to *something*. The idea of someone dismissing her work and her feelings this coldheartedly cut deep, which is why her response was so immature, it was almost fetal.

Olive: Well, fuck you, Adam.

She immediately regretted it, but for some reason she couldn't bring herself to send an apology. It wasn't until twenty minutes later that she realized that Adam wasn't going to reply. A warning popped up on the upper part of her screen, informing her that her battery was at 5 percent.

With a deep sigh, Olive stood up from her bed and looked around the room in search of her charger.

"NOW GO RIGHT."

"Got it." Malcolm's finger flicked the turn signal lever. A clicking sound filled the small car. "Going right."

"No, don't listen to Jeremy. Turn left."

Jeremy leaned forward and swatted Anh's arm. "Malcolm, trust me. Anh has never been to the farm. It's on the right."

"Google Maps says left."

"Google Maps is wrong."

“What do I do?” Malcolm made a face in the rearview mirror. “Left? Right? Ol, what do I do?”

In the back seat, Olive looked up from the car window and shrugged. “Try right; if it’s wrong, we’ll just turn around.” She shot Anh a quick, apologetic glance, but she and Jeremy were too busy mock-glaring at each other to notice.

Malcolm grimaced. “We’ll be late. God, I hate these stupid picnics.”

“We are, like”—Olive glanced at the car’s clock—“one hour late, already. I think we can add ten minutes to that.” *I just hope there’s some food left*. Her stomach had been growling for the past two hours, and there was no way everyone in the car hadn’t noticed.

After her argument with Adam three days ago, she’d been tempted to just skip the picnic. Hole herself up in the lab and continue with what she had been doing the whole weekend—ignore the fact that she had told him to fuck off, and with very little reason. She could use the time to work on Tom’s report, which was proving to be trickier and more time-consuming than she’d initially thought—probably because Olive couldn’t forget how much was at stake and kept rerunning analyses and agonizing over every single sentence. But she’d changed her mind last minute, telling herself that she’d promised Adam that they’d put on a show for the department chair. It would be unfair of her to back out after he’d done more than his share of the deal when it came to convincing Anh.

That was, of course, in the very unlikely case that he still wanted anything to do with Olive.

“Don’t worry, Malcolm,” Anh said. “We’ll get there eventually. If anyone asks, let’s just say that a mountain lion attacked us. God, why is it so hot? I brought sunblock, by the way. SPF thirty and fifty. No one is going anywhere before putting it on.”

In the back seat Olive and Jeremy exchanged a resigned look, well acquainted with Anh's sunscreen obsession.

The picnic was in full swing when they finally arrived, as crowded as most academic events with free food. Olive made a beeline for the tables and waved at Dr. Aslan, who was sitting in the shade of a giant oak with other faculty members. Dr. Aslan waved back, no doubt pleased to note that her authority extended to commandeering her grads' free time on top of the eighty hours a week they already spent in the lab. Olive smiled weakly in a valiant attempt not to look resentful, grabbed a cluster of white grapes, and popped one into her mouth while letting her gaze wander around the fields.

Anh was right. This September was uncommonly hot. There were people everywhere, sitting on the lawn chairs, lying down in the grass, walking in and out of the barns—all enjoying the weather. A few were eating from plastic plates on folding tables close to the main house, and there were at least three games going on—a version of volleyball with the players standing in a circle, a soccer match, and something that involved a Frisbee and over a dozen half-dressed dudes.

"What are they even playing?" Olive asked Anh. She spotted Dr. Rodrigues tackle someone from immunology and looked back to the almost empty tables, cringing. Slim pickings was all that was left. Olive wanted a sandwich. A bag of chips. Anything.

"Ultimate Frisbee, I think? I don't know. Did you put on sunblock? You're wearing a tank top and shorts, so you really should."

Olive bit into another grape. "You Americans and your fake sports."

"I'm pretty sure there are Canadian tournaments of Ultimate Frisbee, too. You know what's not fake?"

"What?"

“Melanoma. Put on some sunscreen.”

“I will, Mom.” Olive smiled. “Can I eat first?”

“Eat what? There’s nothing left. Oh, there’s some corn bread over there.”

“Oh, cool. Pass it over.”

“Don’t eat the corn bread, guys.” Jeremy’s head popped up between Olive and Anh. “Jess said that a pharmacology first-year sneezed all over it. Where did Malcolm go?”

“Parking— *Holy. Shit.*”

Olive looked up from her perusal of the table, alarmed by the urgency in Anh’s tone. “What?”

“Just, *holy shit.*”

“Yeah, what—”

“Holy shit.”

“You mentioned that already.”

“Because—*holy shit*.”

She glanced around, trying to figure out what was going on. “What is— Oh, there’s Malcolm. Maybe he found something to eat?”

“Is that *Carlsen*?”

Olive was already walking toward Malcolm to find something edible and skip the whole sunscreen nonsense altogether, but when she heard Adam’s name, she stopped dead in her tracks. Or maybe it wasn’t Adam’s name but the way Anh was saying it. “What? Where?”

Jeremy pointed at the Ultimate Frisbee crowd. “That’s him, right? Shirtless?”

“*Holy shit*,” Anh repeated, her vocabulary suddenly pretty limited, given her twentysomething years of education. “Is that

a six-pack?"

Jeremy blinked. "Might even be an eight-pack."

"Are those his real shoulders?" Anh asked. "Did he have shoulder-enhancement surgery?"

"That must be how he used the MacArthur grant," Jeremy said. "I don't think shoulders like that exist in nature."

"God, is that Carlsen's *chest*?" Malcolm leaned his chin over Olive's shoulder. "Was that thing under his shirt while he was ripping my dissertation proposal a new one? *Ol.* Why didn't you say that he was *shredded*?"

Olive just stood there, rooted to the ground, arms dangling uselessly at her sides. *Because I didn't know. Because I had no idea.* Or maybe she had, a bit, from seeing him push that truck the other day—though she'd been trying to suppress that particular mental image.

"Unbelievable." Anh pulled Olive's hand toward herself, overturning it to squirt a healthy dose of lotion on her palm. "Here, put this on your shoulders. And your legs. And your face, too—you're probably at high risk for all sorts of skin stuff, Freckles McFreckleface. Jer, you too."

Olive nodded numbly and began to massage the sunscreen into her arms and thighs. She breathed in the smell of coconut oil, trying hard not to think about Adam and about the fact that he really *did* look like that. Mostly failing, but hey.

"Are there actual studies?" Jeremy asked.

"Mmm?" Anh was pulling her hair up in a bun.

"On the link between freckles and skin cancer."

"I don't know."

"Feels like there would be."

"True. I wanna know now."

“Hold on. Is there Wi-Fi here?”

“Ol, do you have internet?”

Olive wiped her hands on a napkin that looked mostly unused. “I left my phone in Malcolm’s car.”

She turned her head away from Anh and Jeremy, who were now studying the screen of Jeremy’s iPhone, until she had a good view of the Ultimate Frisbee group—fourteen men and zero women. It probably had to do with the general excess of testosterone in STEM programs. At least half the players were faculty or postdocs. Adam, of course, and Tom, and Dr. Rodrigues, and several others from pharmacology. All equally shirtless. Though, no. Not equal at all. There was really nothing equal about Adam.

Olive wasn’t like this. She really was not. She could count the number of guys she’d been this viscerally attracted to on one hand. Actually—on one finger. And at the moment said guy was running toward her, because Tom Benton, bless his heart, had just thrown the Frisbee way too clumsily, and it was now in a patch of grass approximately ten feet from Olive. And Adam, shirtless Adam, just happened to be the one closest to where it landed.

“Oh, check out this paper.” Jeremy sounded excited.

“Khalesi et al., 2013. It’s a meta-analysis. ‘Cutaneous markers of photo-damage and risk of basal cell carcinoma of the skin.’ In *Cancer Epidemiology, Biomarkers & Prevention*.”

Jeremy fist-pumped. “Olive, are you listening to this?”

Nope. No, she was not. She was mostly trying to empty her brain, and her eyes, too. Of her fake boyfriend and the sudden warm ache in her stomach. She just wished she were elsewhere. That she were temporarily blind and deaf.

“Hear this: solar lentigines had weak but positive associations with basal cell carcinoma, with odds ratios around

1.5. Okay, I don't like this. Jeremy, hold the phone. I'm giving Olive more sunscreen. Here's SPF fifty; it's probably what you need."

Olive tore her eyes from Adam's chest, now alarmingly close, and turned around, stepping away from Anh. "Wait. I already put some on."

"Ol," Anh told her, with that sensible, motherly tone she used whenever Olive slipped and confessed that she mostly got her veggie servings from french fries, or that she washed her colors and whites in the same load. "You know the literature."

"I do not know the literature, and neither do you, you just know one line from one abstract and—"

Anh grabbed Olive's hand again and poured half a gallon of lotion in it. So much of it that Olive had to use her left palm to prevent it from spilling over—until she was just standing there like an idiot, her hands cupped like a beggar as she half drowned in goddamn sunscreen.

"Here you go." Anh smiled brightly. "Now you can protect yourself from basal cell carcinoma. Which, frankly, sounds awful."

"I . . ." Olive would have face-palmed, if she'd had the freedom to move her upper limbs. "I hate sunscreen. It's sticky and it makes me smell like a piña colada and—this is way too much."

"Just put on as much as your skin will absorb. Especially around the freckled areas. The rest, you can share with someone."

"Okay. Anh, then, you take some. You too, Jeremy. You're a ginger, for God's sake."

"A redhead with no freckles, though." He smiled proudly, like he'd created his genotype all on his own. "And I already

put on a ton. Thanks, babe." He leaned down for a brief kiss to Anh's cheek, which almost devolved into a make-out session.

Olive tried not to sigh. "Guys, what do I do with this?"

"Just find someone else. Where did Malcolm go?"

Jeremy snorted. "Over there, with Jude."

"Jude?" Anh frowned.

"Yeah, that neuro fifth-year."

"The MD-Ph.D.? Are they dating or—"

"Guys." It took Olive all she had not to yell. "I have no mobility. Please, fix this sunscreen mess you created."

"God, Ol." Anh rolled her eyes. "You're so dramatic sometimes. Hang on—" She waved at someone behind Olive, and when she spoke, her voice was much louder. "Hey, Dr. Carlsen! Have you put on sunscreen yet?"

In the span of a microsecond Olive's entire brain burst into flames—and then crumbled into a pile of ashes. Just like that, one hundred billion neurons, one thousand billion glial cells, and who knew how many milliliters of cerebrospinal fluid, just ceased to exist. The rest of her body was not doing very well, either, since Olive could feel all her organs shut down in real time. From the very beginning of her acquaintance with Adam there had been about ten instances of Olive wishing to drop dead on the spot, for the earth to open and swallow her whole, for a cataclysm to hit and spare her from the embarrassment of their interactions. This time, though, it felt as though the end of the world might happen for real.

Don't turn around, what's left of her central nervous system told her. *Pretend you didn't hear Anh. Will this into nonexistence.* But it was impossible. There was this triangle of sorts, formed by Olive, and Anh in front of her, and Adam probably—surely—standing behind her; it wasn't as if Olive

had a choice. Any choice. Especially when Adam, who couldn't possibly imagine the depraved direction of Anh's thoughts, who couldn't possibly see the bucketful of sunscreen that had taken residence in Olive's hands, said, "No."

Well. Shit.

Olive spun around, and there he was—sweaty, holding a Frisbee in his left hand, and so very, very shirtless. "Perfect, then!" Anh said, sounding so chipper. "Olive has way too much and was wondering what to do with it. She'll put some on you!"

No. No, no, *no*. "I can't," she hissed at Anh. "It would be *highly* inappropriate."

"Why?" Anh blinked at her innocently. "I put sunscreen on Jeremy all the time. Look"—she squirted lotion on her hand and haphazardly slapped it across Jeremy's face— "*I* am putting sunscreen on my boyfriend. Because I don't want him to get melanoma. Am I 'inappropriate'?"

Olive was going to murder her. Olive was going to make her lick every drop of this stupid sunscreen and watch her writhe in pain as she slowly died of oxybenzone poisoning.

Later, though. For now, Adam was looking at her, expression completely unreadable, and Olive would have apologized, she would have crawled under the table, she would have at least waved at him—but all she could do was stare and notice that even though the last time they'd talked she'd insulted him, he didn't really seem angry. Just thoughtful and a little confused as he looked between Olive's face and the small lake of white goop that now lived in her hands, probably trying to figure out if there was a way to get out of this latest shitshow—and then, finally, just giving up on it.

He nodded once, minutely, and turned around, the muscles in his back shifting as he threw Dr. Rodrigues the Frisbee and yelled, "I'm taking five!"

Which, Olive assumed, meant that they were actually doing this. Of course they damn were. Because this was her life, and these were her poor, moronic, harebrained choices.

"Hey," Adam said to her once they were closer. He was looking at her hands, at the way she had to hold them in front of her body like a supplicant. Behind her, Anh and Jeremy were no doubt ogling them.

"Hey." She was wearing flip-flops, and he had sneakers on, and—he was always tall, but right now he towered over her. It put her eyes right in front of his pecs, and . . . *No. Nope. Not doing that.*

"Can you turn around?"

He hesitated for a moment, but then he did, uncharacteristically obedient. Which ended up resolving none of Olive's problems, since his back was in no way less broad or impressive than his chest.

"Can you, um . . . duck a bit?"

Adam bent his head until his shoulders were . . . still abnormally high but somewhat easier to reach. As she lifted her right hand, some of the lotion dripped to the ground—*Where it belongs*, she thought savagely—and then she was doing it, this thing that she had never thought she would ever, ever do. Putting sunscreen on Adam Carlsen.

It wasn't her first time touching him. Therefore, she shouldn't have been surprised by how hard his muscles were, or that there was no give to his flesh. Olive remembered the way he'd pushed the truck, imagined that he could probably bench-press three times her weight, and then ordered herself to stop, because that was *not* an appropriate train of thought. Still, the issue remained that there was nothing between her hand and his skin. He was hot from the sun, his shoulders relaxed and immobile under her touch. Even in public, close as they were, it felt like something intimate was happening.

“So.” Her mouth was dry. “This might be a good time to mention how sorry I am that we keep getting stuck in these situations.”

“It’s fine.”

“I really am, though.”

“It’s not your fault.” There was an edge in his voice.

“Are you okay?”

“Yep.” He nodded, though the movement seemed taut. Which had Olive realizing that maybe he was not as relaxed as she’d initially thought.

“How much do you hate this, on a scale from one to ‘correlation equals causation’?”

He surprised her by chuckling, though he still sounded strained. “I don’t hate it. And it’s not your fault.”

“Because I know this is the worst possible thing, and—”

“It isn’t. Olive.” He turned a bit to look her in the eyes, a mix of amusement and that odd tension. “These things are going to keep on happening.”

“Right.”

His fingers brushed softly against her left palm as he stole a bit of her sunscreen for his front. Which, all in all, was for the best. She really didn’t want to be massaging lotion into his chest in front of 70 percent of her Ph.D. program—not to mention her boss, since Dr. Aslan was probably watching them like a hawk. Or maybe she wasn’t. Olive had no intention of turning around to check. She’d rather live in less-than-blissful ignorance. “Mostly because you hang out with some really nosy people.”

She burst out laughing. “I know. Believe me, I’m *really* regretting befriending Anh right now. Kind of contemplating assassinating her, to tell the truth.”

She moved to his shoulder blades. He had a lot of small moles and freckles, and she wondered exactly how inappropriate it would be if she played connect the dots on them with her fingers. She could just imagine the amazing pictures it would reveal.

"But hey, the long-term benefits of sunscreen have been proven by scientists. And you *are* pretty pale. Here, duck a bit more, so I can get your neck."

"Mmm."

She walked around him to get to the front part of his shoulders. He was so big, she was going to have to use all this stupid lotion. Might even need to ask Anh for more. "At least the department chair is getting a show. And you look like you're having fun."

He glanced pointedly at the way her hand was spreading sunscreen on his collarbone. Olive's cheeks burned. "No, I mean—not because I am . . . I meant, you look like you're having a good time playing Frisbee. Or whatever."

He made a face. "Beats chitchatting, for sure."

She laughed. "That makes sense. I bet that's why you're so fit. You played lots of sports growing up because it got you out of talking with people. It also explains why now that you're an adult your personality is so—" Olive stopped short.

Adam lifted one eyebrow. "Antagonistic and unapproachable?"

Crap. "I didn't say that."

"You just typed it."

"I-I'm sorry. I'm very sorry. I didn't mean to—" She pressed her lips together, flustered. Then she noticed that the corners of his eyes were crinkling. "Damn you."

She pinched him lightly on the underside of his arm. He yelped and smiled wider, which made her wonder what he would do if she retaliated by writing her name with sunscreen on his chest, just enough for him to only get a tan around it. She tried to imagine his face after taking off his T-shirt, finding the five letters printed on his flesh in the reflection of his bathroom mirror. The expression he'd make. Whether he'd touch them with his fingertips.

Crazy, she told herself. *This whole thing, it's driving you crazy. So he's handsome, and you find him attractive. Big deal. Who cares?*

She wiped her mostly lotion-free hands down the columns of his biceps and took a step back. "You're good to go, Dr. Antagonistic."

He smelled of fresh sweat, himself, and coconut. Olive wasn't going to get to talk with him again until Wednesday, and why the thought came with an odd pang in her chest, she had no clue.

"Thanks. And thank Anh, I guess."

"Mm. What do you think she'll have us do next time?"

He shrugged. "Hold hands?"

"Feed each other strawberries?"

"Good one."

"Maybe she'll up her game."

"Fake wedding?"

"Fake-buy a house together?"

"Fake-sign the mortgage paperwork?"

Olive laughed, and the way he looked at her, kind and curious and patient . . . she must be hallucinating it. Her head was not right. She should have brought a sun hat.

“Hey, Olive.”

She tore her gaze from Adam’s and noticed Tom approaching. He, too, was shirtless, and clearly fit, and had a large number of abs that were defined enough to be easily counted. And yet, for some reason, it did absolutely nothing for Olive.

“Hi, Tom.” She smiled, even though she was a little irritated by the interruption. “Loved your talk the other day.”

“It was good, wasn’t it? Did Adam tell you about our change of plans?”

She tilted her head. “Change of plans?”

“We’ve been making great progress on the grant, so we’re going to Boston next week to finish setting up stuff on the Harvard side.”

“Oh, that’s great.” She turned to Adam. “How long will you be gone?”

“Just a few days.” His tone was quiet. Olive felt relief that it wasn’t going to be longer. For indiscernible reasons.

“Would you be able to send me your report by Saturday, Olive?” Tom asked. “Then I’ll have the weekend to look it over, and we’ll discuss it while I’m still here.”

Her brain exploded in a flurry of panic and bright red-alert signs, but she managed to keep her smile in place. “Yeah, of course. I’ll send it to you on Saturday.” Oh God. Oh *God*. She was going to have to work around the clock. She wasn’t going to get any sleep this week. She was going to have to bring her laptop to the toilet and write while she peed. “No problem at all,” she added, leaning even harder into her lie.

“Perfect.” Tom winked at her, or maybe just squinted in the sun. “You going back to play?” he asked Adam, and when

Adam nodded, Tom spun around and headed back into the game.

Adam hesitated for just a second longer, then he nodded at Olive and left. She tried hard not to stare at his back as he rejoined his team, which seemed to be overjoyed to have him again. Clearly, sports were another thing Adam Carlsen excelled at—unfairly so.

She didn't even have to check to know that Anh and Jeremy and pretty much everyone else had been staring at them for the past five minutes. She fished a seltzer can out of the nearest cooler, reminding herself that this was exactly what they wanted from this arrangement, and then found a spot under an oak tree next to her friends—all this sunscreen fuss, and now they were sitting in the shade. Go figure.

She wasn't even that hungry anymore, a small miracle courtesy of having to apply sunscreen to her fake boyfriend very publicly.

"So, what's he like?" Anh asked. She was lying down with her head on Jeremy's lap. Above her, Malcolm was staring at the Frisbee players, probably swooning over how pretty Holden Rodrigues looked in the sun.

"Mm?"

"Carlsen. Oh, actually"—Anh smirked—"I meant to say *Adam*. You call him Adam, right? Or do you prefer Dr. Carlsen? If you guys role-play with schoolgirl uniforms and rulers, I totally want to hear about it."

"Anh."

"Yeah, how *is* Carlsen?" Jeremy asked. "I'm assuming he's different with you than with us. Or does he also tell *you* repeatedly that the font for the labels of your x- and y-axis is irritatingly small?"

Olive smiled into her knees, because she could totally imagine Adam saying that. Could almost hear his voice in her head. “No. Not yet, at least.”

“What’s he like, then?”

She opened her mouth to answer, thinking it would be easy. Of course, it was everything but. “He’s just . . . you know.”

“We don’t,” Anh said. “There must be more to him than meets the eye. He’s so moody and negative and angry and—”

“He’s not,” Olive interrupted. And then regretted it a little, because it wasn’t entirely true. “He *can* be. But he can *not* be, too.”

“If you say so.” Anh seemed unconvinced. “How did you even start dating? You never told me.”

“Oh.” Olive looked away and let her gaze wander. Adam must have just done something noteworthy, because he and Dr. Rodrigues were exchanging a high five. She noticed Tom staring at her from the field and waved at him with a smile. “Um, we just talked. And then got coffee. And then . . .”

“How does that even happen?” Jeremy interrupted, clearly skeptical. “How does one decide to say yes to a date with Carlsen? Before seeing him half-naked, anyway.”

You kiss him. You kiss him, and then, next thing you know, he’s saving your ass and he’s buying you scones and calling you a smart-ass in a weirdly affectionate tone, and even when he’s being his moody asshole self, he doesn’t seem to be that bad. Or bad at all. And then you tell him to fuck off over the phone and possibly ruin everything.

“He just asked me out. And I said yes.” Though it was obviously a lie. Someone with a *Lancet* publication and back muscles that defined would never ask someone like Olive out.

“So you didn’t meet on Tinder?”

“What? No.”

“Because that’s what people are saying.”

“I’m not on Tinder.”

“Is Carlsen?”

No. Maybe. Yes? Olive massaged her temples. “Who’s saying that we met on Tinder?”

“Actually, rumor’s that they met on Craigslist,” Malcolm said distractedly, waving at someone. She followed his gaze and noticed that he was staring at Holden Rodrigues—who appeared to be smiling and waving back.

Olive frowned. Then she parsed what Malcolm had just said. “*Craigslist?*”

Malcolm shrugged. “Not saying that I believed it.”

“Who are *people*? And why are they even talking about us?”

Anh reached up to pat Olive on the shoulder. “Don’t worry, the gossip about you and Carlsen died down after Dr. Moss and Sloane had that very public argument about people disposing of blood samples in the ladies’ restroom. Well, for the most part. Hey.”

She sat up and wrapped an arm around Olive, pulling her in for an embrace. She smelled like coconut. Stupid, stupid sunscreen.

“Chill. I know some people have been weird about this, but Jeremy and Malcolm and I are just happy for you, Ol.” Anh smiled at her reassuringly, and Olive felt herself relax. “Mostly that you’re finally getting laid.”

Chapter Eight

HYPOTHESIS: *On a Likert scale ranging from one to ten, Jeremy's timing will be negative fifty, with a standard error of the mean of zero point two.*

Number thirty-seven—salt-and-vinegar potato chips—was sold out. It was frankly inexplicable: Olive had come in at 8:00 p.m., and there had been at least one bag left in the break room's vending machine. She distinctly remembered patting the back pocket of her jeans for quarters, and the feeling of triumph at finding exactly four. She recalled looking forward to that moment, approximately two hours later, by which time she estimated that she'd have completed exactly a third of her work and would thus be able to reward herself with the indisputable best among the snacks that the fourth floor had to offer. Except that the moment had come, and there were no chips left. Which was a problem, because Olive had already inserted her precious quarters inside the coin slot, and she was very hungry.

She selected number twenty-four (Twix)—which was okay, though not her favorite by a long shot—and listened to its dull, disappointing thud as it fell to the bottom shelf. Then she bent to pick it up, staring wistfully at the way the gold wrapper shined in her palm.

"I wish you were salt-and-vinegar chips," she whispered at it, a trace of resentment in her voice.

"Here."

"Aaah!" She startled and instantly turned around, hands in front of her body and ready to defend—possibly even to

attack. But the only person in the break room was Adam, sitting on one of the small couches in the middle, looking at her with a bland, slightly amused expression.

She relaxed her pose and clutched her hands to her chest, willing her racing heartbeat to slow down. “When did you get here?!”

“Five minutes ago?” He regarded her calmly. “I was here when you came in.”

“Why didn’t you *say* something?”

He tilted his head. “I could ask the same.”

She covered her mouth with her hand, trying to recover from the scare. “I didn’t see you. Why are you sitting in the dark like a creep?”

“Light’s broken. As usual.” Adam lifted his drink—a bottle of Coke that hilariously read “Seraphina”—and Olive remembered Jess, one of his grads, complaining about how strict Adam was about bringing food and drinks into his lab. He grabbed something from the cushion and held it out to Olive. “Here. You can have the rest of the chips.”

Olive narrowed her eyes. “You.”

“Me?”

“You stole my chips.”

His mouth curved. “Sorry. You can have what’s left.” He peeked into the bag. “I didn’t have many, I don’t think.”

She hesitated and then made her way to the couch. She distrustfully accepted the small bag and took a seat next to him. “Thanks, I guess.”

He nodded, taking a sip of his drink. She tried not to stare at his throat as he tipped his head back, averting her eyes to her knees.

“Should you be having caffeine at”—Olive glanced at the clock—“ten twenty-seven p.m.?” Come to think of it, he shouldn’t be having caffeine at all, given his baseline shiny personality. And yet the two of them got coffee together every Wednesday. Olive was nothing but an enabler.

“I doubt I’ll be sleeping much, anyway.”

“Why?”

“I need to run a set of last-minute analyses for a grant due on Sunday night.”

“Oh.” She leaned back, finding a more comfortable position. “I thought you had minions for that.”

“As it turns out, asking your grads to pull an all-nighter for you is frowned upon by HR.”

“What a travesty.”

“Truly. What about you?”

“Tom’s report.” She sighed. “I’m supposed to send it to him tomorrow and there’s a section that I just don’t . . .” She sighed again. “I’m rerunning a few analyses, just to make sure that everything is *perfect*, but the equipment I’m working with is not exactly . . . *ugh*.”

“Have you told Aysegul?”

Aysegul, he’d said. Naturally. Because Adam was a colleague of Dr. Aslan, not her grad, and it made sense that he’d think of her as Aysegul. It wasn’t the first time he’d called her that; it wasn’t even the first time Olive had noticed. It was just hard to reconcile, when they were sitting alone and talking quietly, that Adam was faculty and Olive was very much not. Worlds apart, really.

“I did, but there’s no money to get anything better. She’s a great mentor, but . . . last year her husband got sick and she decided to retire early, and sometimes it feels like she’s

stopped caring." Olive rubbed her temple. She could feel a headache coming up and had a long night ahead of her. "Are you going to tell her I told you that?"

"Of course."

She groaned. "Don't."

"Might also tell her about the kisses you've been extorting, and the fake-dating scheme you roped me into, and above all about the sunscreen—"

"Oh God." Olive hid her face in her knees, arms coming up to wrap around her head. "God. The sunscreen."

"Yeah." His voice sounded muffled from down here. "Yeah, that was . . ."

"Awkward?" she offered, sitting back straight with a grimace. Adam was looking elsewhere. She was probably imagining it, the way he was flushing.

He cleared his throat. "Among other things."

"Yep." It had been other things, too. A lot of things that she was not going to mention, because *her* other things were sure to not be *his* other things. His other things were probably "terrible" and "harrowing" and "invasive." While hers . . .

"Is the sunscreen going in the Title IX complaint?"

His mouth twitched. "Right on the first page. *Nonconsensual sunblock application*."

"Oh, come on. I saved you from basal cell carcinoma."

"Groped under SPF pretense."

She swatted him with her Twix, and he ducked a bit to avoid her, amused. "Hey, you want half of this? Since I fully plan to eat what's left of your chips."

"Nah."

"You sure?"

“Can’t stand chocolate.”

Olive stared at him, shaking her head in disbelief. “You would, wouldn’t you? Hate everything that is delicious and lovely and comforting.”

“Chocolate’s disgusting.”

“You just want to live in your dark, bitter world made of black coffee and plain bagels with plain cream cheese. And occasionally salt-and-vinegar chips.”

“They are clearly your favorite chips—”

“Not the point.”

“—and I am flattered that you’ve memorized my orders.”

“It does help that they’re always the same.”

“At least I’ve never ordered something called a *unicorn Frappuccino*.”

“That was so good. It tasted like the rainbow.”

“Like sugar and food coloring?”

“My two favorite things in the universe. Thank you for buying it for me, by the way.” It had made for a nice fake-dating Wednesday treat this week, even though Olive had been so busy with Tom’s report that she hadn’t been able to exchange more than a couple of words with Adam. Which, she had to admit, had been a little disappointing.

“Where’s Tom by the way, while you and I slave our Friday night away?”

“Out. On a date, I think.”

“On a date? Does his girlfriend live here?”

“Tom has lots of girlfriends. In lots of places.”

“But are any of them fake?” She beamed at him, and could tell that he was tempted to smile back. “Would you like half a

dollar, then? For the chips?"

"Keep it."

"Great. Because it's about a third of my monthly salary."

She actually managed to make him laugh, and—it didn't just transform his face, it changed the entire space they were inhabiting. Olive had to convince her lungs not to stop working, to keep taking in oxygen, and her eyes not to get lost in the little lines at the corners of his eyes, the dimples in the center of his cheeks. "Glad to hear that grad students' stipends have not increased since I was one."

"Did you use to live on instant ramen and bananas during your Ph.D., too?"

"I don't like bananas, but I remember having lots of apples."

"Apples are expensive, you fiscally irresponsible splurger." She tilted her head and wondered if it was okay to ask the one thing she'd been dying to know. She told herself that it was probably inappropriate—and then went for it anyway. "How old are you?"

"Thirty-four."

"Oh. Wow." She'd thought younger. Or older, maybe. She'd thought he existed in an ageless dimension. It was so weird to hear a number. To have a year of birth, almost a whole decade before hers. "I'm twenty-six." Olive wasn't sure why she offered up the information, since he hadn't asked. "It's odd to think that you used to be a student, too."

"Is it?"

"Yep. Were you like this as an undergrad, too?"

"Like this?"

"You know." She batted her eyes at him. "Antagonistic and unapproachable."

He glared, but she was starting to not take that too seriously. “I might have been worse, actually.”

“I bet.” There was a brief, comfortable silence as she sat back and began to tackle her bag of chips. It was all she’d ever wanted from a vending machine snack. “So does it get better?”

“What?”

“This.” She gestured inchoately around herself. “Academia. Does it get better, after grad school? Once you have tenure?”

“No. God, no.” He looked so horrified by the assumption, she had to laugh.

“Why do you stick around, then?”

“Unclear.” There was a flash of something in his eyes that Olive couldn’t quite interpret, but—nothing surprising about that. There was a lot about Adam Carlsen she didn’t know. He was an ass, but with unexpected depths. “There’s an element of sunk-cost fallacy, probably—hard to step away, when you’ve invested so much time and energy. But the science makes it worth it. When it works, anyway.”

She hummed, considering his words, and remembered The Guy in the bathroom. He’d said that academia was a lot of bucks for little bang, and that one needed a good reason to stick around. Olive wondered where he was now. If he’d managed to graduate. If he knew that he’d helped someone make one of the hardest decisions of their life. If he had any idea that there was a girl, somewhere in the world, who thought about their random encounter surprisingly often. Doubtful.

“I know grad school is supposed to be miserable for everyone, but it’s depressing to see tenured faculty here on a Friday night, instead of, I don’t know, watching Netflix in bed, or getting dinner with their girlfriend—”

“I thought you were my girlfriend.”

Olive smiled up at him. “Not quite.” *But, since we’re on the topic: why exactly don’t you have one? Because it’s getting harder and harder for me to figure that one out. Except that maybe you just don’t want one. Maybe you just want to be on your own, like everything about your behavior suggests, and here I am, annoying the shit out of you. I should just pocket my chips and my candy and go back to my stupid protein samples, but for some reason you are so comfortable to be around. And I am drawn to you, even though I don’t know why.*

“Do you plan to stay in academia?” he asked. “After you graduate.”

“Yes. Maybe. No.”

He smiled, and Olive laughed.

“Undecided.”

“Right.”

“It’s just . . . there are things that I love about it. Being in the lab, doing research. Coming up with study ideas, feeling that I’m doing something meaningful. But if I go the academic route, then I’ll also need to do a lot of other things that I just . . .” She shook her head.

“Other things?”

“Yeah. The PR stuff, mostly. Write grants and convince people to fund my research. Network, which is a special kind of hell. Public speaking, or even one-on-one situations where I have to impress people. That’s the worst, actually. I hate it so much—my head explodes and I freeze and everyone is looking at me ready to judge me and my tongue paralyzes and I start wishing that I was dead and then that *the world* was dead and —” She noticed his smile and gave him a rueful look. “You get the gist.”

“There are things you can do about that, if you want. It just takes practice. Making sure your thoughts are organized. Stuff like that.”

“I know. And I try to do that—I did it before my meeting with Tom. And I still stammered like an idiot when he asked me a simple question.” *And then you helped me, ordered my thoughts, and saved my ass, without even meaning to.* “I don’t know. Maybe my brain is broken.”

He shook his head. “You did great during that meeting with Tom, especially considering that you were forced to have your fake boyfriend sit next to you.” She didn’t point out that his presence had actually made things better. “Tom certainly seemed impressed, which is no small feat. And if anyone screwed up, it was definitely him. I’m sorry he did that, by the way.”

“Did what?”

“Force you to talk about your personal life.”

“Oh.” Olive looked away, toward the blue glow of the vending machine. “It’s okay. It’s been a while.” She was surprised to hear herself continue. To feel herself *wanting* to continue. “Since high school, really.”

“That’s . . . young.” There was something about his tone, maybe the evenness, maybe the lack of overt sympathy, that she found reassuring.

“I was fifteen. One day my mom and I were there, just . . . I don’t even know. Kayaking. Thinking about getting a cat. Arguing over the way I’d pile stuff on top of the trash can when it was overflowing and I didn’t want to take it out. And next thing I knew she had her diagnosis, and three weeks later she’d already—” She couldn’t say it. Her lips, her vocal folds, her heart, they just wouldn’t form the words. So she swallowed them. “The child welfare system couldn’t figure out where to send me until I became of age.”

"Your dad?"

She shook her head. "Never in the picture. He's an asshole, according to my mom." She laughed softly. "The never-takes-out-the-trash gene clearly came from his side of the family. And my grandparents had died when I was a kid, because apparently that's what people around me do." She tried to say it jokingly, she really tried. To not sound bitter. She thought she even succeeded. "I was just . . . alone."

"What did you do?"

"Foster home until sixteen, then I emancipated." She shrugged, hoping to brush off the memory. "If only they'd caught it earlier, even just by a few months—maybe she'd be here. Maybe surgery and chemo would have actually done something. And I . . . I was always good at science stuff, so I thought that the least I could do was . . ."

Adam dug into his pockets for a few moments and held out a crumpled paper napkin. Olive stared at it, confused, until she realized that her cheeks had somehow grown wet.

Oh.

"Adam, did you just offer me a used tissue?"

"I . . . maybe." He pressed his lips together. "I panicked."

She chuckled wetly, accepting his gross tissue and using it to blow her nose. They'd kissed twice, after all. Why not share a bit of snot? "I'm sorry. I'm usually not like this."

"Like what?"

"Weepy. I . . . I shouldn't talk about this."

"Why?"

"Because." It was hard to explain, the mix of pain and affection that always resurfaced when she talked about her mother. It was the reason she almost never did it, and the reason she hated cancer so much. Not only had it robbed her of

the person she loved the most, but it had also turned the happiest memories of her life into something bittersweet. “It makes me weepy.”

He smiled. “Olive, you can talk about it. And you should let yourself be weepy.”

She had a sense that he really meant it. That she could have talked about her mom for however long she liked, and he would have listened intently to every second of it. She wasn’t sure she was ready for it, though. So she shrugged, changing the topic. “Anyway, now here I am. Loving lab work and barely dealing with the rest—abstracts, conferences, networking. Teaching. Rejected grants.” Olive gestured in Adam’s direction. “Failed dissertation proposals.”

“Is your lab mate still giving you a hard time?”

Olive waved her hand dismissively. “I’m not his favorite person, but it’s fine. He’ll get over it.” She bit into her lip. “I’m sorry about the other night. I was rude. You have every right to be mad.”

Adam shook his head. “It’s okay. I understand where you were coming from.”

“I do get what you’re saying. About not wanting to form a new generation of crappy millennial scientists.”

“I don’t believe I’ve ever used the expression ‘crappy millennial scientists.’ ”

“But FYI, I still think that you don’t need to be that harsh when you give feedback. We get the gist of what you’re saying, even if you give criticism more nicely.”

He looked at her for a long time. Then he nodded, once. “Noted.”

“Are you going to be less harsh, then?”

“Unlikely.”

She sighed. “You know, when I have no more friends and everyone hates me because of this fake-dating thing, I’ll be super lonely and you are going to have to hang out with me every day. I’ll annoy you all the time. Is it really worth being mean to every grad in the program?”

“Absolutely.”

She sighed again, this time with a smile, and let the side of her head rest on his shoulder. It might have been a bit forward, but it felt natural—maybe because they seemed to have a knack for getting themselves in situations that required PDA of some sort, maybe because of everything they’d been talking about, maybe because of the hour of the night. Adam . . . well, he didn’t act as if he minded. He was just there, quiet, relaxed, warm and solid through the cotton of his black shirt under her temple. It felt like a long time before he broke the silence.

“I’m not sorry for asking Greg to revise his proposal. But I am sorry that I created a situation that led him to take it out on you. That as long as this continues, it might happen again.”

“Well, I am sorry about the texts I sent,” she said again. “And you’re fine. Even if you’re antagonistic and unapproachable.”

“Good to hear.”

“I should go back to the lab.” She sat up, one hand coming to massage the base of her neck. “My disastrous blotting is not going to fix itself.”

Adam blinked, and there was a gleam in his eyes, as if he hadn’t thought she’d leave so soon. As if he’d have liked for her to stay. “Why disastrous?”

She groaned. “It’s just . . .” She reached for her phone and tapped on the home button, pulling up a picture of her last Western blot. “See?” She pointed at the target protein. “This—it shouldn’t . . .”

He nodded, thoughtful. “You’re sure the starting sample was good? And the gel?”

“Yep, not runny, or dried out.”

“It looks like the antibody might be the problem.”

She looked up at him. “You think so?”

“Yep. I’d check the dilution and the buffer. If not that, it might also be a wonky secondary antibody. Come by my lab if it still doesn’t work; you can borrow ours. Same for other pieces of equipment or supplies. If there’s anything you need, just ask my lab manager.”

“Oh, wow. Thank you.” She smiled. “Now I’m actually a bit sorry that I can’t have you on my dissertation committee. Perhaps rumors of your cruelty have been greatly exaggerated.”

His mouth twitched. “Maybe you just pull out the best in me?”

She grinned. “Then maybe I should stick around. Just, you know, to save the department from your terrible moods?”

He glanced at the picture of the failed Western blot in her hand. “Well, it doesn’t look like you’re going to graduate anytime soon.”

She half laughed, half gasped. “Oh my God. Did you just —?”

“Objectively—”

“This is the rudest, meanest thing—” She was laughing. Holding her stomach as she waved her finger at him.

“—based on your blotting—”

“—that anyone could *ever* say to a Ph.D. student. Ever.”

“I think I can find meaner things. If I really put myself to it.”

“We’re done.” She wished she weren’t smiling. Then maybe he’d take her seriously instead of just looking at her with that patient, amused expression. “Seriously. It was nice while it lasted.” She made to stand and leave indignantly, but he grabbed the sleeve of her shirt and gently tugged at it until she was sitting down again, next to him on the narrow couch —maybe even a little closer than before. She continued glaring, but he regarded her blandly, clearly unperturbed.

“There’s nothing bad about taking more than five years to graduate,” he offered in a conciliatory tone.

Olive huffed. “You just want me to stay around forever. Until you have the biggest, fattest, strongest Title IX case to ever exist.”

“That was my plan all along, in fact. The one and only reason I kissed you out of the blue.”

“Oh, shut up.” She ducked her chin into her chest, biting into her lip and hoping he wouldn’t notice her grinning like the idiot she was. “Hey, can I ask you something?”

Adam looked at her expectantly, like he seemed to a lot lately, so she continued, her tone softer and quieter.

“Why are you really doing this?”

“Doing what?”

“The fake dating. I understand that you want to look like you’re not a flight risk, but . . . Why aren’t you *really* dating someone? I mean, you’re not that bad.”

“High praise.”

“No, come on, what I meant was . . . Based on your fake-dating behavior, I’m sure that a lot of women . . . well, *some* women would love to real-date you.” She bit into her lip again, playing with the hole that was opening up on the knee of her

jeans. “We’re friends. We weren’t when we started, but we are now. You can tell me.”

“Are we?”

She nodded. *Yes. Yes, we are. Come on*. “Well, you did just break one of the sacred tenets of academic friendships by mentioning my graduation timeline. But I’ll forgive you if you tell me if this is really better for you than . . . you know, getting a *real* girlfriend.”

“It is.”

“Really?”

“Yes.” He seemed honest. He was honest. Adam was not a liar; Olive would bet her life on it.

“Why, though? Do you enjoy the sunscreen-mediated fondling? And the opportunity to donate hundreds of your dollars to the campus Starbucks?”

He smiled faintly. And then he wasn’t smiling anymore. Not looking at her, either, but somewhere in the direction of the crumpled plastic wrapper that she’d tossed on the table a few minutes go.

He swallowed. She could see his jaw work.

“Olive.” He took a deep breath. “You should know that—”

“Oh my God!”

They both startled, Olive considerably more so than Adam, and turned toward the entrance. Jeremy stood there, one hand dramatically clutching his sternum. “You guys scared the shit out of me. What are you doing sitting in the dark?”

What are you *doing here?* Olive thought ungraciously. “Just chatting,” she said. Though it didn’t seem like a good descriptor of what was going on. And yet, she couldn’t put her finger on why.

“You scared me,” Jeremy repeated once more. “Are you working on your report, Ol?”

“Yeah.” She stole a quick glance at Adam, who was motionless and expressionless next to her. “Just taking a quick break. I was about to go back, actually.”

“Oh, cool. Me too.” Jeremy smiled, pointing in the direction of his lab. “I need to go isolate a bunch of virgin fruit flies. Before they’re not virgins anymore, you know?” He wiggled his eyebrows, and Olive had to force out a small, unconvincing laugh. She usually enjoyed his sense of humor. Usually. Now she just wished . . . She wasn’t sure what she wished. “You coming with, Ol?”

No, I’m fine right here, actually. “Sure.” Reluctantly, she stood. Adam did the same, gathering their wrappers and his empty bottle and sorting them in the recycling bins.

“Have a good night, Dr. Carlsen,” Jeremy said from the entrance. Adam just nodded at him, a touch curtly. The set of his eyes was yet again impossible to decipher.

I guess that’s it, then, she thought. Where the weight in her chest had come from, she had no clue. She was probably just tired. Had eaten too much, or not enough.

“See you, Adam. Right?” she murmured before he could head for the entrance and leave the room. Her voice was pitched low enough that Jeremy couldn’t possibly have heard her. Maybe Adam hadn’t, either. Except that he paused for a moment. And then, when he walked past her, she had the impression of knuckles brushing against the back of her hand.

“Good night, Olive.”

Chapter Nine

HYPOTHESIS: *The more I mention an attachment in an email, the less likely I will be to actually include said attachment.*

SATURDAY, 6:34 p.m.

FROM: Olive-Smith@stanford.edu

TO: Tom-Benton@harvard.edu

SUBJECT: Re: Report on Pancreatic Cancer Study

Hi Tom,

Here is the report you asked for, with a detailed description of what I have done so far, as well as my thoughts on future directions and the resources I will need to expand. I'm excited to hear your thoughts on my work!

Sincerely,

Olive

SATURDAY, 6:35 p.m.

FROM: Olive-Smith@stanford.edu

TO: Tom-Benton@harvard.edu

SUBJECT: Re: Report on Pancreatic Cancer Study

Hi Tom,

Oops, forgot the attachment.

Sincerely,

Olive

Today, 3:20 p.m.

FROM: Tom-Benton@harvard.edu

TO: Olive-Smith@stanford.edu

SUBJECT: Re: Report on Pancreatic Cancer Study

Olive,

Done reading the report. Do you think you could come over to Adam's to chat about it? Maybe tomorrow morning (Tue) at nine? Adam and I will be leaving for Boston on Wed afternoon.

Olive's heart beat faster—whether at the idea of being in Adam's home or at the thought of getting her answer from Tom, she wasn't sure. She immediately texted Adam.

Olive: Tom just invited me to your place to talk about the report I sent him. Would it be okay if I came over?

Adam: Of course. When?

Olive: Tomorrow at 9 a.m. Will you be home?

Adam: Probably. There are no bike lanes to my house. Do you need a ride? I can pick you up.

She thought about it for a few moments and decided that she liked the idea a little too much.

Olive: My roommate can drive me, but thanks for offering.

MALCOLM DROPPED HER off in front of a beautiful Spanish colonial house with stucco walls and arched windows and refused to back out of the driveway until Olive agreed to slide a can of pepper spray in her backpack. She walked over the brick-tile path and up to the entrance, marveling at the green of the yard and at the cozy atmosphere of the porch. She was about to ring the doorbell when she heard her name.

Adam was behind her, bathed in sweat and clearly just back from his morning run. He was wearing sunglasses, shorts, and a Princeton Undergrad Mathletes T-shirt that stuck to his chest. Out of the ensemble, the only nonblack items were the AirPods in his ears, peeking through the damp waves of his hair. She felt her cheeks curve into a smile, trying to imagine what he was listening to. Probably Coil, or Kraftwerk.

The Velvet Underground. A TED Talk on water-efficient landscaping. Whale noises.

She would have given a huge chunk of her salary in exchange for five minutes alone with his phone, just to mess with his playlist. Add Taylor Swift, Beyoncé, maybe some Ariana. Broaden his horizons. She couldn't see his eyes behind the dark lenses, but she didn't need to. His mouth had curved as soon as he'd noticed her, his smile slight but definitely there.

"You okay?" he asked.

Olive realized that she'd been staring. "Um, yeah. Sorry. You?"

He nodded. "Did you find the house all right?"

"Yes. I was just about to knock."

"No need." He passed her and opened the door for her, waiting until she'd stepped inside to close it after them. She caught a whiff of his scent—sweat and soap and something dark and good—and wondered anew at how familiar it had become to her. "Tom's probably this way."

Adam's place was light, spacious, and simply furnished. "No taxidermied animals?" she asked under her breath.

He was clearly about to flip her off when they found Tom in the kitchen, typing on his laptop. He looked up at her and grinned—which, she hoped, was a good sign.

"Thanks for coming, Olive. I wasn't sure I'd have time to go to campus before leaving. Sit down, please." Adam disappeared from the room, probably to go shower, and Olive felt her heart pick up. Tom had made his decision. Her destiny was going to be defined by the next few minutes.

"Can you clarify a couple of things for me?" he asked, turning his laptop toward her and pointing at one of the figures

she'd sent. "To make sure I understand your protocols correctly."

When Adam came back twenty minutes later, hair damp and wearing one of his ten million black Henleys that were all a tiny bit different and yet still managed to fit him in the most irritatingly perfect way, she was just wrapping up an explanation of her RNA analyses. Tom was taking notes on his laptop.

"Whenever you guys are done, I can give you a ride back to campus, Olive," Adam offered. "I need to drive in, anyway."

"We're done," Tom said, still typing. "She's all yours."

Oh. Olive nodded and gingerly stood up. Tom hadn't given her an answer yet. He'd asked lots of interesting, smart questions about her project, but he hadn't told her whether he wanted to work with her next year. Did it mean that the answer was a no, but he'd rather not communicate it to Olive in her "boyfriend's" home? What if he'd never really thought that her work was worth funding? What if he'd just been faking it because Adam was his friend? Adam had said that Tom wasn't like that, but what if he'd been wrong and now—

"You ready to go?" Adam asked. She grabbed her backpack, trying to collect herself. She was fine. This was fine. She could cry about this later.

"Sure." She rocked once on her heels, giving Tom one last look. Sadly, he seemed taken with his laptop. "Bye, Tom. It was nice to meet you. Have a safe trip home."

"Likewise," he said, not even glancing at her. "I had lots of interesting conversations."

"Yeah." It must have been the section on genome-based prognostics, she thought, following Adam out of the room. She'd suspected it was too weak, but she'd been stupid and

she'd sent the report anyway. Stupid, stupid, *stupid*. She should have beefed it up. The most important thing now was to avoid crying until she was—

"And, Olive," Tom added.

She paused under the doorframe and looked back at him. "Yes?"

"I'll see you next year at Harvard, right?" His gaze finally slid up to meet hers. "I have the perfect bench set aside for you."

Her heart detonated. It absolutely exploded with joy in her chest, and Olive felt a violent wave of happiness, pride, and relief all wash over her. It could have easily knocked her to the floor, but by some miracle of biology she managed to stay upright and smile at Tom.

"I can't wait," she said, voice thick with happy tears. "Thank you so much."

He gave her a wink and one last smile, kind and encouraging. Olive barely managed to wait until she was outside to fist-pump, then jump around a few times, then fist-pump again.

"You all done?" Adam asked.

She turned around, remembering that she wasn't alone. His arms were folded on his chest, fingers drumming against his biceps. There was an indulgent expression in his eyes, and—she should have been embarrassed, but she just couldn't help it. Olive threw herself at him and hugged his torso as tight as she could. She closed her eyes when, after a few seconds of hesitation, he wrapped his arms around her.

"Congratulations," he whispered softly against her hair. Just like that Olive was on the verge of tears all over again.

Once they were in Adam's car—a Prius, to exactly no one's surprise—and driving to campus, she felt so happy she couldn't possibly be quiet.

"He'll take me. He said he'll take me."

"He'd be an idiot not to." Adam was smiling softly. "I knew he would."

"Had he told you?" Her eyes widened. "You knew, and you didn't even tell me—"

"He hadn't. We haven't discussed you."

"Oh?" She tilted her head, turning around in the car seat to better look at him. "Why?"

"Unspoken agreement. It might be a conflict of interest."

"Right." Sure. It made sense. Close friend and girlfriend. Fake girlfriend, actually.

"Can I ask you something?"

She nodded.

"There are lots of cancer labs in the US. Why did you choose Tom's?"

"Well, I sort of didn't. I emailed several people—two of whom are at UCSF, which is much closer than Boston. But Tom was the only one who answered." She leaned her head against the seat. It occurred to her for the first time that she was going to have to leave her life for an entire year. Her apartment with Malcolm, her nights spent with Anh. Adam, even. She immediately pushed the thought away, not ready to entertain it. "Why do professors never answer students' emails, by the way?"

"Because we get approximately two hundred a day, and most of them are iterations of 'why do I have a C minus?' " He was quiet for a moment. "My advice for the future is to have your adviser reach out, instead of doing it yourself."

She nodded and stored away the information. “I’m glad Harvard worked out, though. It’s going to be amazing. Tom is such a big name, and the amount of work I can do in his lab is limitless. I’ll be running studies twenty-four seven, and if the results are what I think they’ll be, I’ll be able to publish in high-impact journals and probably get a clinical trial started in just a few years.” She felt high on the prospect. “Hey, you and I now have a collaborator in common, on top of being excellent fake-dating partners!” A thought occurred to her. “What is your and Tom’s big grant about, anyway?”

“Cell-based models.”

“Off-lattice?”

He nodded.

“Wow. That’s cool stuff.”

“It’s the most interesting project I’m working on, for sure. Got the grant at the right moment, too.”

“What do you mean?”

He was silent for a beat while he switched lanes. “It’s different from my other grants—mostly genetic stuff. Which is interesting, don’t get me wrong, but after ten years researching the same exact thing, I was in a rut.”

“You mean . . . bored?”

“To death. I briefly considered going into industry.”

Olive gasped. Switching from academia to industry was considered the ultimate betrayal.

“Don’t worry.” Adam smiled. “Tom saved the day. When I told him I wasn’t enjoying research anymore, we brainstormed some new directions, found something we were both enthusiastic about, and wrote the grant.”

Olive felt a sudden surge of gratitude toward Tom. Not only was he going to rescue her project, but he was the reason

Adam was still around. The reason she'd gotten the opportunity to know him. "It must be nice to be excited about work again."

"It is. Academia takes a lot from you and gives back very little. It's hard to stick around without a good reason to do so."

She nodded absentmindedly, thinking that the words sounded familiar. Not just the content, but the delivery, too. Not surprising, though: it was exactly what The Guy in the bathroom had told her all those years ago. *Academia's a lot of bucks for very little bang. What matters is whether your* reason *to be in academia is good enough.*

Suddenly, something clicked in her brain.

The deep voice. The blurry dark hair. The crisp, precise way of talking. Could The Guy in the bathroom and Adam be . . .

No. Impossible. The Guy was a student—though, had he explicitly said so? No. No, what he'd said was *This is my lab's bathroom* and that he'd been there for six years, and he hadn't answered when she'd asked about his dissertation timeline, and—

Impossible. Improbable. Inconceivable.

Just like everything else about Adam and Olive.

Oh God. What if they'd *really* met years ago? He probably didn't remember, anyway. Surely. Olive had been no one. Still was no one. She thought about asking him, but why? He had no idea that a five-minute conversation with him had been the exact push Olive needed. That she'd thought about him for years.

Olive remembered her last words to him—*Maybe I'll see you next year*—and oh, if only she'd known. She felt a surge of something warm and soft in the squishy part of herself that

she guarded most carefully. She looked at Adam, and it swelled even larger, even stronger, even hotter.

You, she thought. *You*. *You are just the most—*

The worst—

The best—

Olive laughed, shaking her head.

"What?" he asked, puzzled.

"Nothing." She grinned at him. "Nothing. Hey, you know what? You and I should go get coffee. To celebrate."

"Celebrate what?"

"Everything! Your grant. My year at Harvard. How great our fake dating is going."

It was probably unfair of her to ask, since they were not due for fake-dating coffee until tomorrow. But the previous Wednesday had lasted just a few short minutes, and since Friday night, there had been about thirty times when Olive had to forcibly remove her phone from her hands to avoid texting him things he couldn't possibly care about. He didn't need to know that he was right and the problem with her Western blot had been the antibody. There was no way he'd have answered her if on Saturday at 10:00 p.m., when she'd been dying to know if he was in his office, she had sent that *Hey, what are you up to?* message that she'd written and deleted twice. And she was glad she'd ended up chickening out of forwarding him that *Onion* article on sun-safety tips.

It was probably unfair of her to ask, and yet today was a momentous day, and she found herself wanting to celebrate. With him.

He bit the inside of his cheek, looking pensive. "Would it be actual coffee, or chamomile tea?"

"Depends. Will you go all moody on me?"

“I will if you get pumpkin stuff.”

She rolled her eyes. “You have no taste.” Her phone pinged with a reminder. “Oh, we should go to Fluchella, too. Before coffee.”

A vertical line appeared between his brows. “I’m afraid to ask what that is.”

“Fluchella,” Olive repeated, though it was clearly not helpful, judging from how the line bisecting his forehead deepened. “Mass flu vaccination for faculty, staff, and students. At no charge.”

Adam made a face. “It’s called Fluchella?”

“Yep, like the festival. Coachella?”

Adam was clearly not familiar.

“Don’t you get university emails about this stuff? There’ve been at least five.”

“I have a great spam filter.”

Olive frowned. “Does it block Stanford emails, too? Because it shouldn’t. It might end up filtering out important messages from admin and students and—”

Adam arched one eyebrow.

“Oh. Right.”

Don’t laugh. Don’t laugh. He doesn’t need to know how much he makes you laugh.

“Well, we should go get our flu shots.”

“I’m good.”

“You got one already?”

“No.”

“I’m pretty sure it’s mandatory for everyone.”

The set of Adam's shoulders clearly broadcasted that he was, in fact, *not* everyone. "I never get sick."

"I doubt it."

"You shouldn't."

"Hey, the flu is more serious than you might think."

"It's not that bad."

"It is, especially for people like you."

"Like me?"

"You know . . . people of a certain age."

His mouth twitched as he turned into the campus parking lot. "You smart-ass."

"Come on." She leaned forward, poking his biceps with her index finger. They had touched so much at this point. In public, and alone, and a mixture of the two. It didn't feel weird. It felt good and natural, like when Olive was with Anh, or Malcolm. "Let's go together."

He didn't budge, parallel parking in a spot that would have taken Olive about two hours of maneuvering to fit into. "I don't have time."

"You just agreed to go get coffee. You must have some time."

He finished parking in less than a minute and pressed his lips together. Not answering her.

"Why don't you want to get the shot?" She studied him suspiciously. "Are you some kind of anti-vaxxer?"

Oh, if looks could kill.

"Okay." She furrowed her brow. "Then why?"

"It's not worth the hassle." Was he fidgeting a little? Was he biting the inside of his lip?

“It literally takes ten minutes.” She reached for him, tugging at the sleeve of his shirt. “You get there, they scan your university badge. They give you the shot.” She felt his muscles tense under her fingertips as she said the last word. “Easy peasy, and the best part is, you don’t get the flu for a whole year. Totally— *Oh*.” Olive covered her mouth with her hand.

“What?”

“Oh my God.”

“What?”

“Are you— Oh, Adam.”

“What?”

“Are you afraid of needles?”

He went still. Completely immobile. He wasn’t breathing anymore. “I’m not *afraid* of needles.”

“It’s okay,” she said, making her tone as reassuring as possible.

“I know, since I’m not—”

“This is a safe space for you and your fear of needles.”

“There is no fear of—”

“I get it, needles *are* scary.”

“It’s not—”

“You are allowed to be scared.”

“I am *not*,” he told her, a little too forcefully, and then turned away, clearing his throat and scratching the side of his neck.

Olive pressed her lips together, and then said, “Well, *I* used to be scared.”

He looked at her, curious, so she continued.

“As a child. My . . .” She had to clear her throat. “My mother would have to hold me in a bear hug every time I needed a shot, or I’d thrash around too much. And she had to bribe me with ice cream, but the problem was that I wanted it *immediately* after my shot.” She laughed. “So she’d buy an ice cream sandwich before the doctor’s appointment, and by the time I was ready to eat, it’d be all melted in her purse and make a huge mess and . . .”

Dammit. She was weepy, again. In front of Adam, *again*.

“She sounds lovely,” Adam said.

“She was.”

“And to be clear, I’m not afraid of needles,” he repeated. This time, his tone was warm and kind. “They just feel . . . disgusting.”

She sniffled and looked up at him. The temptation to hug him was almost irresistible. But she’d already done that today, so she made do with patting him on the arm. “Aww.”

He pinned her with a withering look. “Don’t *aww* me.”

Adorable. He was adorable. “No, really, they *are* gross. Stuff pokes at you, and then you bleed. The feeling of it—yikes.”

She got out of the car and waited for him to do the same. When he joined her, she smiled at him reassuringly.

“I get it.”

“You do?” He didn’t seem convinced.

“Yep. They’re horrible.”

He was still a little distrustful. “They are.”

“And scary.” She wrapped her hand around his elbow and began to pull him in the direction of the Fluchella tent. “Still,

you need to get over it. For science. I'm taking you to get a flu shot."

"I—"

"This is nonnegotiable. I'll hold your hand, during."

"I don't need you to hold my hand. Since I'm not going." Except that he *was* going. He could have planted his feet and stood his ground, and he would have turned into an immovable object; Olive would have had no way of dragging him anywhere. And yet.

She let her hand slide down to his wrist and looked up at him. "You *so* are."

"Please." He looked pained. "Don't make me."

He was *so* adorable. "It's for your own good. And for the good of the elderly people who might come in any proximity to you. Even more elderly than you, that is."

He sighed, defeated. "Olive."

"Come on. Maybe we're lucky and the chair will spot us. And I'll buy you an ice cream sandwich afterward."

"Will I be paying for this ice cream sandwich?" He sounded resigned now.

"Likely. Actually, scratch that, you probably don't like ice cream anyway, because you don't enjoy anything that's good in life." She kept on walking, pensively chewing on her lower lip. "Maybe the cafeteria has some raw broccoli?"

"I don't deserve this verbal abuse on top of the flu shot."

She beamed. "You're such a trooper. Even though the big bad needle is out to get you."

"You are a smart-ass." And yet, he didn't resist when she continued to pull him behind her.

It was ten on an early-September morning, the sun already shining too bright and too hot through the cotton of Olive's shirt, the sweetgum leaves still a deep green and showing no sign of turning. It felt different from the past few years, this summer that didn't seem to want to end, that was stretched full and ripe past the beginning of the semester. Undergrads must have been either dozing off in their midmorning classes or still asleep in bed, because for once that harried air of chaos that always coated the Stanford campus was missing. And Olive—Olive had a lab for next year. Everything she'd worked toward since fifteen, it was finally going to happen.

Life didn't get much better than this.

She smiled, smelling the flower beds and humming a tune under her breath as she and Adam walked quietly, side by side. As they made their way across the quad, her fingers slid down from his wrist and closed around his palm.

Chapter Ten

HYPOTHESIS: *If I fall in love, things will invariably end poorly.*

The knockout mouse had been hanging from a wire for a length of time that should have been impossible, considering how it had been genetically modified. Olive frowned at it and pressed her lips together. It was missing crucial DNA. All the hanging-from-a-wire proteins had been erased. There was no way it could hold on for this long. It was the whole point of knocking out its stupid genes—

Her phone lit up, and the corner of her eye darted to its screen. She was able to read the name of the sender (Adam) but not the content of the message. It was 8:42 on Wednesday, which immediately had her worried that he might want to cancel their fake date. Maybe he thought that because he'd let Olive pick out an ice cream sandwich for him yesterday after Fluchella (which she may or may not have ended up eating herself) they didn't need to meet today. Maybe she shouldn't have forced him to sit on a bench with her and recount the marathons they had run, and possibly she had come off as annoying when she'd stolen his phone, downloaded her favorite running app, and then friended herself on it. He had seemed to be enjoying himself, but maybe he hadn't been.

Olive glanced at her gloved hands, and then back at her mouse, who was still holding on to the wire.

"Dude, stop trying so hard." She kneeled until she was at eye level with the cage. The mouse kicked around with its little legs, its tail flopping back and forth. "You're supposed to be bad at this. And I'm supposed to write a dissertation about

how bad you are. And then you get a chunk of cheese, and I get a real job that pays real money and the joy of saying 'I'm not that kind of doctor' when someone is having a stroke on my airplane."

The mouse squeaked and let go of the wire, flopping on the floor of the testing cage with a thud.

"That'll do it." She quickly got rid of her gloves and unlocked her phone with her thumb.

Adam: My arm hurts.

She initially thought that he was giving her a reason why they couldn't meet up. Then she remembered waking up and rubbing her own achy arm.

Olive: From the flu shot?

Adam: It's really painful.

She giggled. She truly had not thought she was the type to, but here she was, covering her mouth with her hand and . . . yes, giggling like a fool in the middle of the lab. Her mouse was staring up at her, its tiny red eyes a mix of judgment and surprise. Olive hastily turned away and looked back at her phone.

Olive: Oh, Adam. I'm so sorry.

Olive: Should I come over and kiss it better?

Adam: You never said it would hurt so bad.

Olive: As someone once told me, it's not my job to work on your emotion regulation skills.

Adam's answer was one single emoji (a yellow hand with a raised middle finger), and Olive's cheeks pulled with how hard she was grinning. She was about to reply with a kiss emoji when a voice interrupted her.

"Gross."

She looked up from her phone. Anh stood in the lab's entrance, sticking out her tongue.

"Hey. What are you doing here?"

"Borrowing gloves. *And* being grossed out."

Olive frowned. "Why?"

"We're out of the small size." Anh stepped inside, rolling her eyes. "Honestly, they never buy enough because I'm the only woman in the lab, but it's not like I don't go through gloves as fast as—"

"No, why are you grossed out?"

Anh made a face and plucked two purple gloves from Olive's stash. "Because of how in love you are with Carlsen. Is it okay if I take a few pairs?"

"What are you—" Olive blinked at her, still clutching her phone. Was Anh going crazy? "I'm not *in love* with him."

"Uh-huh, sure." Anh finished stuffing her pockets with gloves and then looked up, finally noticing Olive's distressed expression. Her eyes widened. "Hey, I was kidding! You're not gross. I probably look the same when I'm texting Jeremy. And it's actually very sweet, how gone you are for him—"

"But I'm *not*. Gone." Olive was starting to panic. "I don't —It's just—"

Anh pressed her lips together, as if biting back a smile. "Okay. If you say so."

"No, I'm serious. We're just—"

"Dude, it's okay." Anh's tone was reassuring and a little emotional. "It's just, you're so amazing. And special. And honestly, my favorite person in the whole world. But sometimes I get worried that no one but Malcolm and me will ever get to experience how incredible you are. Well, until now. Now I'm not worried anymore, because I've seen you and

Adam together, at the picnic. And in the parking lot. And . . . every other time, really. You're *both* crazy in love, and over the moon about it. It's cute! Except that first night," she added, pensive. "I maintain *that* was pretty awkward."

Olive stiffened. "Anh, it's not like that. We're just . . . dating. Casually. Hanging out. Getting to know each other. We're not . . ."

"Okay, sure. If you say so." Anh shrugged, clearly not believing a word of what Olive was saying. "Hey, I gotta go back to my bacterial culture. I'll come bug you when I'm on break, okay?"

Olive nodded slowly, watching her friend's back as she headed for the door. Olive's heart skipped a beat when Anh paused and turned around, her expression suddenly serious.

"Ol. I just want you to know that . . . I was very worried about you getting hurt from my dating Jeremy. But now I'm not anymore. Because I know what you really look like when you . . . Well." Anh gave her a sheepish grin. "I won't say it, if you don't want me to."

She left with a wave of her hand, and Olive stood frozen, watching the doorframe long past the moment Anh had disappeared. Then she lowered her gaze to the floor, slumped on the stool behind her, and thought one single thing:

Shit.

IT WASN'T THE end of the world. These things happened. Even the best of people developed crushes—Anh had said love, oh God, she had said *love*—on the person they were fake-dating. It didn't mean anything.

Except that: Fuck. Fuck, fuck, *fuck*.

Olive locked the door of her office behind her and plopped herself into a chair, hoping today wouldn't be the one time in the semester that her office mates decided to show up before 10:00 a.m.

It was all her fault. Her stupid doing. She had known, she *had known*, that she'd begun to find Adam attractive. She had known almost from the very beginning, and then she'd started talking with him, she'd started getting to know him even though it was never part of the plan, and—damn him to hell for being so different from what she'd expected. For making her want to be with him more and more. Damn him. It had been there, staring at Olive for the past few days, and she hadn't noticed. Because she was an idiot.

She stood abruptly and dug into her pocket for her phone, pulling up Malcolm's contact.

Olive: We have to meet.

Bless Malcolm, because it took him fewer than five seconds to answer.

Malcolm: Lunch? I'm about to dig into the neuromuscular junction of a juvenile rat.

Olive: I need to talk to you NOW.

Olive: Please.

Malcolm: Starbucks. In 10.

"I TOLD YOU SO."

Olive didn't bother lifting her forehead from the table. "You didn't."

"Well, maybe I didn't say, 'Hey, don't do this fake-dating shit because you're going to fall for Carlsen,' but I did say that

the whole idea was idiotic and a car wreck waiting to happen —which I believe encompasses the current situation."

Malcolm was sitting across from her, by the window of the crowded coffee shop. Around them students chatted, laughed, ordered drinks—rudely unaware of the sudden maelstrom in Olive's life. She pushed up from the cold surface of the table and pressed her palms into her eyes, not quite ready to open them yet. She might never be ready again. "How could this happen? I am not like this. This is not me. How could I—and Adam Carlsen, of everyone. *Who is into Adam Carlsen?*"

Malcolm snorted. "Everyone, Ol. He's a tall, broody, sullen hunk with a genius IQ. Everyone likes tall, broody, sullen hunks with genius IQs."

"I don't!"

"Clearly you do."

She squeezed her eyes shut and whimpered. "He's really not that sullen."

"Oh, he is. Just, you don't notice, because you're halfway gone for him."

"I am not—" She smacked her forehead. Repeatedly. "Shit."

He leaned forward and grabbed her hand, his skin dark and warm against hers. "Hey," he told her, voice pitched to a comforting tone. "Settle down. We'll figure it out." He even tacked on a smile. Olive loved him so much in that moment, even with all the I told you sos. "First of all, how bad is it?"

"I don't know. Is there a scale?"

"Well, there is liking, and there is *liking*."

She shook her head, feeling utterly lost. "I just like him. I want to spend time with him."

“Okay, that doesn’t mean anything. You also want to spend time with me.”

She grimaced, feeling herself blush scarlet. “Not quite like that.”

Malcolm was quiet for a beat. “I see.” He knew how big of a deal this was for Olive. They’d talked about it multiple times—how rare it was for her to experience attraction, especially sexual attraction. If there was something wrong with her. If her past had stunted her in some way.

“God.” She just wanted to retreat inside her hoodie like a turtle until it all went away. Go run a race. Start writing her dissertation proposal. Anything but deal with this. “It was there, and I didn’t figure it out. I just thought he was smart and attractive and that he had a nice smile and that we could be friends and—” She rubbed her palms into her eye sockets, wishing she could go back and erase her life choices. The entire past month. “Do you hate me?”

“Me?” Malcolm sounded surprised.

“Yes.”

“No. Why would I hate you?”

“Because he’s been horrible to you, made you throw out a ton of data. It’s just—with me he’s not—”

“I know. Well,” he amended, waving his hand, “I don’t *know* know. But I can believe he’s different with you than when he was in my damn graduate advisory committee.”

“You hate him.”

“Yeah—*I* hate him. Or . . . I dislike him. But you don’t have to dislike him because I do. Though I do reserve the right to comment on your abysmal taste in men. Every other day or so. But, Ol, I saw you guys at the picnic. He definitely wasn’t interacting with you like he does with me. Plus, you know,” he

added begrudgingly, “he’s not *not* hot. I can see why you’d hit that.”

“This is not what you said when I first told you about the fake dating.”

“No, but I’m trying to be supportive here. You weren’t in love with him at the time.”

She groaned. “Can we please not use that word? Ever again? It seems a little premature.”

“Sure.” Malcolm brushed nonexistent dust off his button-down. “Way to bring a rom-com to life, by the way. So, how are you going to break the news?”

She massaged her temple. “What do you mean?”

“Well, you have a thing for him, and you two are friendly. I’m assuming you’re planning to inform him of your . . . feelings? Can I use the word ‘feelings’?”

“No.”

“Whatever.” He rolled his eyes. “You’re going to tell him, right?”

“Of course not.” She snorted out a laugh. “You can’t tell the person you’re fake-dating that you”—her brain scanned itself for the correct word, didn’t find it, and then stumbled on—“*like* them. It’s just not done. Adam will think I orchestrated this. That I was after him all along.”

“That’s ridiculous. You didn’t even know him at the time.”

“Maybe I did, though. Do you remember the guy I told you about, who helped me decide about grad school? The one I met in the bathroom over my interview weekend?”

Malcolm nodded.

“He might have been Adam. I think.”

“You *think*? You mean you didn’t ask him?”

"Of course not."

"Why 'of course'?"

"Because maybe it *wasn't* him. And if he was, he clearly doesn't remember, or he'd have mentioned it weeks ago."

He hadn't been the one wearing expired contacts, after all.

Malcolm rolled his eyes. "Listen, Olive," he said earnestly, "I need you to consider something: What if Adam likes you, too? What if he wants something more?"

She laughed. "There is no way."

"Why not?"

"Because."

"Because what?"

"Because he's him. He's Adam Carlsen, and I . . ." She trailed off. No need to continue. *And I'm me. I am nothing special.*

Malcolm was quiet for a long moment. "You have no idea, do you?" His tone was sad. "You're great. You're beautiful, and loving. You're independent, and a genius scientist, and selfless, and loyal—hell, Ol, look at this ridiculous mess you created just so your friend could date the guy she likes without feeling guilty. There's no way Carlsen hasn't noticed."

"No." She was resolute. "Don't get me wrong, I do think he likes me, but he thinks of me as a friend. And if I tell him and he doesn't want to . . ."

"To what? Doesn't want to fake-date you anymore? It's not like you have much to lose."

Maybe not. Maybe all the talking, and those looks Adam gave her, and him shaking his head when she ordered extra whipped cream; the way he let himself be teased out of his moods; the texts; how he seemed to be so at ease with her, so

noticeably different from the Adam Carlsen she used to be half-scared of—maybe all of that was not much. But she and Adam were friends now, and they could remain friends even past September twenty-ninth. Olive's heart sank at the thought of giving up the possibility of it. "I do, though."

Malcolm sighed, once again enveloping her hand with his. "You have it bad, then."

She pressed her lips together, blinking rapidly to push back the tears. "Maybe I do. I don't know—I've never had it before. I've never wanted to have it."

He smiled reassuringly, even though Olive felt anything but reassured. "Listen, I know it's scary. But this is not necessarily a bad thing."

One single tear was making its way down Olive's cheek. She hastened to clean it with her sleeve. "It's the worst."

"You've finally found someone you're into. And okay, it's Carlsen, but this could still turn out to be great."

"It couldn't. It can't."

"Ol, I know where you're coming from. I get it." Malcolm's hand tightened on hers. "I know it's scary, being vulnerable, but you can *allow* yourself to care. You can want to be with people as more than just friends or casual acquaintances."

"But I can't."

"I don't see why not."

"Because all the people I've cared about are *gone*," she snapped.

Somewhere in the coffee shop, the barista called for a caramel macchiato. Olive immediately regretted her harsh words.

“I’m sorry. It’s just . . . it’s the way it works. My mom. My grandparents. My father—one way or another, everyone is gone. If I let myself care, Adam will go, too.” There. She’d put it into words, said it out loud, and it sounded all the truer because of it.

Malcolm exhaled. “Oh, Ol.” He was one of the few people to whom Olive had opened up about her fears—the constant feeling of not belonging, the never-ending suspicions that since so much of her life had been spent alone, then it would end the same way. That she’d never be worthy of someone caring for her. His knowing expression, a combination of sorrow and understanding and pity, was unbearable to watch. She looked elsewhere—at the laughing students, at the coffee cup lids stacked next to the counter, at the stickers on a girl’s MacBook—and slid her hand away from under his palm.

“You should go.” She attempted a smile, but it felt wobbly. “Finish your surgeries.”

He didn’t break eye contact. “*I* care. *Anh* cares—Anh would have chosen you over Jeremy. And you care, too. We all care about one another, and I’m still here. I’m not going anywhere.”

“It’s different.”

“How?”

Olive didn’t bother answering and used her sleeve to dry her cheek. Adam was different, and what Olive wanted from him was different, but she couldn’t—didn’t want to articulate it. Not now. “I won’t tell him.”

“Ol.”

“No,” she said, firm. With her tears gone, she felt marginally better. Maybe she was not who she had thought, but she could fake it. She could pretend, even to herself. “I’m not going to tell him. It’s a horrible idea.”

"Ol."

"How would that conversation even work? How would I phrase it? What are the right words?"

"Actually you should probably—"

"Do I tell him that I'm into him? That I think about him all the time? That I have a huge crush on him? That—"

"Olive."

In the end, what tipped her off was not Malcolm's words, or his panicky expression, or the fact that he was clearly looking at a spot somewhere above her shoulders. In the end, Anh chose that exact moment to text her, which drew Olive's eyes to the numbers on the screen.

10:00 a.m.

It was ten. On a Wednesday morning. And Olive was currently sitting in the campus Starbucks, the very same Starbucks where she had spent her Wednesday mornings for the past few weeks. She whirled around and—

She wasn't even surprised to find Adam. Standing behind her. Close enough that unless both his eardrums had ruptured since the last time they'd talked, he must have heard every single word that came out of Olive's mouth.

She wished she could expire on the spot. She wished she could crawl outside her body and this café, melt in a pool of sweat, and seep between the tiles on the floor, just vanish into thin air. But all these things were currently beyond her skill set, so she fixed a weak smile on her face and looked up at Adam.

Chapter Eleven

HYPOTHESIS: *Whenever I lie, things will get worse by a factor of 743.*

"Did you . . . did you hear that?" she blurted out.

Malcolm hurried to clear the table of his stuff, muttering tightly, "I was just about to go."

Olive barely noticed, busy watching Adam slide the chair back to sit across from her.

Shit.

"Yes," he said, bland and even, and Olive felt like she was about to disintegrate into a million tiny pieces, here, in this exact spot. She wanted him to take it back. Wanted him to say "No, heard what?" She wanted to go back to earlier this morning and rewind it all, this horrible mess of a day. Not look at the texts on her phone, not let Anh walk in on her mooning over her fake boyfriend, not pour her heart out to Malcolm in the worst possible place.

Adam couldn't know. He simply couldn't. He'd think that Olive had kissed him on purpose, that she'd masterminded this whole fiasco, that she'd manipulated him into this situation. He'd feel compelled to break up with her well before he could reap any benefits from their arrangement. And he would hate her.

The prospect was terrifying, so she said the one thing she could think of.

"It wasn't about you."

The lie rolled off her tongue like a mudslide: unpremeditated, quick, and bound to leave a huge mess behind.

"I know." He nodded, and . . . he didn't even look surprised. It was as though it had never occurred to him that Olive might have been interested in him. It made her want to cry—a frequent state on this stupid morning—but instead of doing that, she just vomited out another lie.

"I just . . . I have a thing. For a guy."

He nodded again, this time slowly. His eyes darkened, and the corner of his jaw twitched, just for a moment. She blinked, and his expression was blank again. "Yeah. I gathered that."

"This guy, he's . . ." She swallowed. What was he? *Quick, Olive,* quick. An immunologist? Icelandic? A giraffe? What was he?

"You don't have to explain if you don't want." Adam's voice seemed slightly offbeat, but also comforting. Tired. Olive realized that she was wringing her hands, and instead of stopping she simply hid them under the table.

"I . . . It's just that . . ."

"It's okay." He offered her a reassuring smile, and Olive—she couldn't possibly look at him. Not a second longer. She averted her eyes, desperately wishing she had something to say. Something to fix this. Right outside the café's window, a group of undergrads were huddling together in front of a laptop, laughing at something playing on the screen. A gust of wind scattered a stack of notes, and a boy scrambled to retrieve them. In the distance, Dr. Rodrigues was walking in the direction of Starbucks.

"This . . . our arrangement." Adam's voice pulled her back inside. To the lies and the table between them; to the gentle, soft way he was talking to her. Kind, he'd been so kind.

Adam. I used to think the worst of you, and now . . .

"It's supposed to help both of us. If it stops doing so . . ."

"No." Olive shook her head. "No. I . . ." She forced her face into a smile. "It's complicated."

"I see."

She opened her mouth to say that no, he couldn't possibly see. He couldn't possibly see anything, because Olive had just made all of this up. This clusterfuck of a situation. "I don't—" She wet her lips. "There is no need to stop our arrangement early, because I can't tell him that I like him. Because I—"

"Dude." A hand clapped on Adam's shoulder. "Since when are you not in your offi— Oh. I see." Dr. Rodrigues's gaze slid from Adam to Olive and settled on her. For a second, he just stood by the table and took her in, surprised to find her there. Then his mouth widened into a slow grin. "Hey, Olive."

During Olive's first year of grad school, Dr. Rodrigues had been on her preassigned graduate advisory committee—an admittedly odd choice, given his relative lack of relevance to her research. And yet, Olive had mostly pleasant memories of her interactions with him. When she'd stammered her way through her committee meetings, he'd always been the first to smile at her, and once he'd even complimented her Star Wars T-shirt—and then proceeded to hum the Darth Vader theme under his breath every time Dr. Moss would start one of her rants against Olive's methods.

"Hey, Dr. Rodrigues." She was positive that her smile was not nearly as convincing as it should have been. "How are you?"

He waved a hand. "Pssh. Please, call me Holden. You're not my student anymore." He patted Adam on the back with relish. "And you have the very dubious pleasure of dating my oldest, most socially impaired friend."

It was all Olive could do not to let her jaw drop. They were friends? Charming, devil-may-care Holden Rodrigues and surly, taciturn Adam Carlsen were *old* friends? Was this something she was supposed to know? Adam's girlfriend would have known, right?

Dr. Rodrigues—Holden? God, Holden. She was never going to get used to the fact that professors were real people and had first names—turned to Adam, who appeared untroubled by having been decreed socially impaired.

He asked, "You're leaving for Boston tonight, right?" and his speech pattern changed a little—pitched lower and faster, more casual. Comfortable. They really were old friends.

"Yeah. Can you still give Tom and me a ride to the airport?"

"Depends."

"On what?"

"Is Tom going to be gagged and tied up in the trunk?"

Adam sighed. "Holden."

"I'll allow him in the back seat, but if he doesn't keep his mouth shut, I'll ditch him on the highway."

"Fine. I'll let him know."

Holden seemed satisfied. "Anyway, I didn't mean to interrupt." He patted Adam's shoulder once more, but he was looking at Olive.

"It's okay."

"Really? Well, then." His smile broadened and he pulled up a chair from a nearby table. Adam closed his eyes, resigned.

"So, what are we talking about?"

Why, I was just in the middle of lying my ass off, thank you for asking. "Ah . . . nothing much. How do you two . . ." She

looked between them, clearing her throat. “Sorry, I forgot how you and Adam know each other.”

A thud—Holden kicking Adam under the table. “You little shit. You didn’t tell her about our decades-deep history?”

“Just trying to forget.”

“You wish.” Holden turned to grin at her. “We grew up together.”

She frowned at Adam. “I thought you grew up in Europe?”

Holden waved his hand. “He grew up all over the place. And so did I, since our parents worked together. Diplomats—the worst kind of people. But then our families settled in DC.” He leaned forward. “Guess who went to high school, college, *and* grad school together.”

Olive’s eyes widened, and Holden noticed, at least judging by how he kicked Adam again.

“You really haven’t told her shit. I see you’re still going for brooding and mysterious.” He rolled his eyes fondly and looked at me again. “Did Adam tell you that he almost didn’t graduate high school? He got suspended for punching a guy who insisted that the Large Hadron Collider would destroy the planet.”

“Interesting how you’re not mentioning that you got suspended alongside me for doing the exact same thing.”

Holden ignored him. “My parents were out of the country on some kind of assignment and briefly forgot that I existed, so we spent the week at my place playing *Final Fantasy*—it was glorious. What about when Adam applied to law school? He must have told you about that.”

“I never *technically* applied to law school.”

“Lies. All lies. Did he at least tell you that he was my prom date? It was *phenomenal*.”

Olive looked at Adam, expecting him to deny that, too. But Adam just half smiled, met Holden's eyes, and said, "It was quite phenomenal."

"Picture this, Olive. Early two thousands. Preppy, ridiculously expensive all-male DC school. Two gay students in grade twelve. Well, two of us that were out, anyway. Richie Muller and I date for the entirety of senior year—and then he dumps me three days before prom for some guy he'd been having a thing with for *months*."

"He was a prick," Adam muttered.

"I have three choices. Not go to the dance and mope at home. Go alone and mope at school. *Or*, have my best friend —who was planning on staying home and moping over gamma-aminobutyric acids—come as my date. Guess which?"

Olive gasped. "How did you convince him?"

"That's the thing, I didn't. When I told him about what Richie did, he *offered*!"

"Don't get used to it," Adam mumbled.

"Can you believe it, Olive?"

That Adam would pretend to be in a relationship with someone to get them out of a miserable situation? "Nope."

"We held hands. We slow-danced. We made Richie spit out his punch and regret every single one of his wretched choices. Then we went home and played even more *Final Fantasy.* It was the shit."

"It was surprisingly fun," Adam conceded, almost reluctantly.

Olive looked at him, and a realization dawned on her: Holden was Adam's Anh. His person. It was obvious that Adam and Tom were very close, too, but the relationship

Adam had with Holden was something else, and . . . and Olive had no idea what to do with this piece of information.

Maybe she should tell Malcolm. He'd either have a field day or go completely berserk.

"Well," Holden said, standing up. "This was fantastic. I'll go get coffee, but we should hang out soon, the three of us. I can't remember the last time I had the pleasure of embarrassing Adam in front of a girlfriend. For now, though, he's all yours." He followed the word "yours" with a smirk that had Olive blushing.

Adam rolled his eyes when Holden left for the coffee counter. Fascinated, Olive followed him with her gaze for several moments. "Um, that was . . . ?"

"Holden for you." Adam seemed barely annoyed.

She nodded, still a little dazed. "I can't believe I'm not your first."

"My first?"

"Your first fake date."

"Right. I guess prom qualifies." He seemed to mull it over. "Holden has had some . . . bad luck with relationships. *Undeserved* bad luck."

It warmed her chest, the protective concern in his tone. Made her wonder if he was even aware of it.

"Did he and Tom ever . . . ?"

He shook his head. "Holden would be outraged if he knew you asked."

"Why doesn't he want to drive Tom to the airport, then?"

Adam shrugged. "Holden has always had a very deep, very irrational dislike of Tom, ever since grad school."

"Oh. Why?"

“Not sure. Not sure Holden knows, either. Tom says he’s jealous. I think it’s just a personality thing.”

Olive fell silent, absorbing the information. “You didn’t tell Holden about us, either. That it’s not real.”

“No.”

“Why?”

Adam looked away. “I don’t know.” His jaw tensed. “I think I just didn’t . . .” His voice trailed off, and he shook his head before giving her a smile, small and a little forced. “He speaks very highly of you, you know?”

“Holden? Of me?”

“Of your work. And your research.”

“Oh.” She had no idea what to say to that. *When did you talk about me? And why?* “Oh,” she repeated uselessly.

She wasn’t sure why now, in this very moment, but the possible ramifications of their arrangement on Adam’s life hit her in full for the first time. They had agreed to fake-date because they both had something to gain from it, but it occurred to her that Adam also had significantly more to lose. Out of all the people she loved, Olive was only lying to one, Anh, and that was absolutely unavoidable. She could not care less about other students’ opinions. Adam, though . . . he was lying on a daily basis to his colleagues and his friends. His grads interacted with him every day believing that he was dating one of their peers. Did they think him lecherous? Had his relationship with Olive changed their perception of him? And what about other faculty members in the department, or in adjacent programs? Just because dating a grad student was allowed, it didn’t mean that it wasn’t frowned upon. And what if Adam met—or had *already* met—someone he actually liked? When they’d struck their deal, he’d said he wasn’t going to date, but that had been weeks ago. Olive herself had

been convinced that she'd never be interested in dating anyone at the time—and didn't that make her want to laugh now, in a remarkably unfunny way? Not to mention that she alone was benefitting from their arrangement. Anh and Jeremy had bought her lie, but Adam's research funds were still frozen.

And yet, he was still helping her despite all of this. And Olive was repaying his kindness by getting ideas and developing feelings that were sure to make him feel uncomfortable.

"Do you want to get coffee?"

Olive looked up from her hands. "No." She cleared her throat against the burning sensation lodged behind her sternum. The idea of coffee made her nauseous. "I think I need to go back to the lab."

She bent down to retrieve her backpack, meaning to stand and leave immediately, but halfway through, a thought swept over her, and she found herself staring at him. He was sitting across from her with a concerned expression, a slight frown creasing his brow.

She attempted a smile. "We are friends, right?"

His frown deepened. "Friends?"

"Yes. You and I."

He studied for a long moment. Something new passed through his face, stark and a little sad. Too fleeting to interpret. "Yes, Olive."

She nodded, unsure as to whether she should be feeling relieved. This was not how she'd thought today would go, and there was a strange pressure behind her eyelids, which had her sliding her arms through the straps of her backpack that much quicker. She waved him goodbye with a tremulous smile, and she'd have already been out of this damn Starbucks, if he hadn't said with that voice of his: "Olive."

She paused right in front of his chair and looked down at him. It was so odd, to be the taller one for once.

"This might be inappropriate, but . . ." His jaw shifted, and he closed his eyes for a second. As if to collect his thoughts. "Olive. You are really . . . You are extraordinary, and I cannot imagine that if you told Jeremy how you feel he wouldn't . . ." He trailed off and then nodded. A punctuation of sorts, as his words and the way he'd said them brought her that much closer to tears.

He thought it was Jeremy. Adam thought Olive had been in love with Jeremy when they'd begun their arrangement—he thought she was *still* in love with him. Because she'd just told a half-assed lie that she was too afraid to take back and—

It was going to happen. She was going to cry, and what she wanted most in the world was to not do it in front of Adam.

"I'll see you next week, okay?" She didn't wait for his response and walked briskly toward the exit, her shoulder bumping into someone she should have apologized to. Once she was outside, she took a deep breath and marched to the biology building, trying to empty her mind, forcing herself to think about the section she was slated to TA later today, the fellowship application she'd promised Dr. Aslan she'd send by tomorrow, the fact that Anh's sister would be in town next weekend and had made plans to cook Vietnamese food for everyone.

A chilly wind weaved through the leaves of the campus trees, pushing Olive's sweater against her body. She hugged herself and didn't look back to the café. Fall had finally begun.

Chapter Twelve

HYPOTHESIS: *If I am bad at doing activity A, my chances of being asked to engage in activity A will rise exponentially.*

Campus felt strangely empty with Adam gone, even on days in which she likely wouldn't have met him anyway. It didn't make much sense: Stanford was most definitely not empty, but teeming with loud, annoying undergrads on their way to and from class. Olive's life, too, was full: her mice were old enough for the behavioral assays to be run, she'd finally gotten revisions for a paper she'd submitted months earlier, and she had to start making concrete plans for her move to Boston next year; the class she was TA'ing had a test coming up, and undergrads magically began to pop by during office hours, looking panicky and asking questions that were invariably answered in the first three lines of the syllabus.

Malcolm spent a couple of days trying to convince Olive to tell Adam the truth, and then became—thankfully—too discouraged by her stubbornness and too busy trying to meditate away his own dating drama to insist. He did bake several batches of butterscotch cookies, though, patently lying that he was "not rewarding your self-destructive behaviors, Olive, but just perfecting my recipe." Olive ate them all, and hugged him from behind while he sprinkled sea salt on top of the last batch.

On Saturday, Anh came over for beer and s'mores, and she and Olive daydreamed about leaving academia and finding industry jobs that paid a proper salary and acknowledged the existence of free time.

“We could, like, sleep in on Sunday mornings. Instead of having to check on our mice at six a.m.”

“Yeah.” Anh sighed wistfully. *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* was running in the background, but neither of them was paying attention. “We could buy real ketchup instead of stealing packets from Burger King. And order that wireless vacuum cleaner I saw on TV.”

Olive giggled drunkenly and turned to her side, making the bed squeak. “Seriously? A vacuum cleaner?”

“A wireless one. It’s *the shit*, Ol.”

“That is . . .”

“What?”

“Just . . .” Olive giggled some more. “It’s the most random thing.”

“Shut up.” Anh smiled but didn’t open her eyes. “I have severe dust allergies. You know what, though?”

“Are you going to hit me with a Trivial Pursuit vacuum cleaner fact?”

The corners of Anh’s eyes crinkled. “Nah,” she said, “I don’t have any. Wait—I think that maybe the first female corporate CEO worked for a vacuum cleaner company.”

“No way. That is *actually* cool.”

“But maybe I’m making it up.” Anh shrugged. “Anyway, what I meant to say is . . . I think I still want it?”

“The vacuum cleaner?” Olive yawned without bothering to cover her mouth.

“No. An academic job. And everything that comes with it. The lab, the grad students, the outrageous teaching load, the race for the NIH grants, the disproportionately low salary. The whole shebang. Jeremy says that Malcolm has it right. That

industry jobs are where it's at. But I think I want to stay and become a professor. It'll be miserable, for sure, but it's the only way to create a good environment for women like us, Ol. Give some competition to all these entitled white men." She grinned, beautiful and fierce. "Jeremy can go into industry and make a ton of blood money that I'll invest in wireless vacuum cleaners."

Olive drunkenly studied the drunken determination on Anh's drunken face, thinking that there was something reassuring in knowing that her closest friend was starting to figure out what she wanted her life to be like. Who she wanted to live it with. It did send a pang deep in Olive's stomach, in that spot that seemed to feel Adam's absence most acutely, but she pushed it down, trying not to think about it too hard. Instead she reached for her friend's hand, squeezed it once, and inhaled the sweet scent of apple from her hair.

"You'll be so good at it, Anh. I can't wait to see you change the world."

ALL IN ALL, Olive's life continued as it always had—except that for the first time, there was something else she'd rather be doing. Someone else she'd rather be with.

So, this is liking someone, she mused. Feeling like the biology building was not worth going to because if Adam was out of town, even the most remote chance of running into him had been taken away from her; constantly spinning around after catching a glimpse of jet-black hair, or when hearing a deep voice that sounded as rich as Adam's but really wasn't; thinking of him because her friend Jess mentioned planning a trip to the Netherlands, or when on *Jeopardy!* the correct answer to "Aichmophobia" turned out to be "What is fear of

needles?"; feeling stuck in an odd limbo, waiting, just waiting, waiting . . . for nothing. Adam was going to come back in a few days, and Olive's lie that she was in love with someone else was still going to be there. September twenty-ninth would arrive all too soon, and anyway, the assumption that Adam could ever see Olive in any romantic light was preposterous. All considered, she was lucky he liked her enough to want to be her friend.

On Sunday, her phone pinged while she was running at the gym. When Adam's name popped up at the top of the screen, she immediately jumped to read it. Except that there wasn't much to read: just the image of a huge drink in a plastic cup, topped with what looked like a muffin. The bottom of the image proudly stated "Pumpkin Pie Frappuccino," and below that, Adam's text:

Adam: Think I can smuggle this on the plane?

She didn't need to be told that she was grinning at her phone like an idiot.

Olive: Well, TSA is notoriously incompetent.

Olive: Though maybe not that incompetent?

Adam: Too bad.

Adam: Wish you were here, then.

Olive's smile stayed in place for a long time. And then, when she remembered the mess she was in, it faded into a heavy sigh.

SHE WAS CARRYING a tray of tissue samples to the electron microscope lab when someone patted her on the shoulder, startling her. Olive nearly tripped and destroyed several

thousand dollars' worth of federal grant funding. When she turned, Dr. Rodrigues was staring at her with his usual boyish grin—like they were best buddies about to go for a beer and a jolly good time, instead of a Ph.D. student and a former member of her advisory committee who'd never quite gotten around to reading any of the paperwork she'd turned in.

"Dr. Rodrigues."

His brow wrinkled. "I thought we'd settled on Holden?"

Had they? "Right. Holden."

He smiled, pleased. "Boyfriend's out of town, huh?"

"Oh. Um . . . Yes."

"You going in there?" He pointed at the microscope lab with his chin, and Olive nodded. "Here, let me get it." He swiped his badge to unlock the door and held it open for her.

"Thank you." She settled her samples on a bench and smiled gratefully, sliding her hands into her back pockets. "I was going to get a cart, but I couldn't find one."

"There's only one left on this floor. I think someone's bringing them home and reselling them."

He grinned, and—Malcolm was right. Had been right for the past two years: there really was something easygoing and effortlessly attractive about Holden. Not that Olive seemed to be interested in anything but tall, broody, sullen hunks with genius IQs.

"Can't blame 'em. I'd have done the same in my grad school days. So, how's life?"

"Um, fine. You?"

Holden ignored her question and casually leaned against the wall. "How bad is it?"

"Bad?"

“Adam being gone. Hell, even I miss that little shit.” He chuckled. “How are you holding up?”

“Oh.” She took her hands out of her pockets, crossed her arms in front of her chest, and then changed her mind and dropped them woodenly by her sides. *Yep. Perfect. Acting natural.* “Fine. Good. Busy.”

Holden looked genuinely relieved. “Great. Have you guys been talking on the phone?”

No. Of course not. Talking on the phone is the hardest, most stressful thing in the world, and I can’t do it with the nice lady who schedules my dental cleanings, let alone with Adam Carlsen. “Ah, mostly texting, you know?”

“Yeah, I do know. However buttoned-up and sulky Adam is with you, please know that he’s making an effort and he’s a million times worse with everyone else. Me included.” He sighed and shook his head, but there was a fondness behind it. An easy affection that Olive couldn’t miss. *My oldest friend*, he’d said about Adam, and clearly he hadn’t been lying. “He’s actually gotten a lot better, since you guys started dating.”

Olive felt on the verge of a full-body cringe. Unsure of what to say, she settled for a simple, painful, awkward: “Really?”

Holden nodded. “Yep. I’m so glad he finally scrounged up the courage to ask you out. He’d been going on and on about this ‘amazing girl’ for years, but he was concerned about being in the same department, and you know how he is . . .” He shrugged and waved his hand. “I’m glad he finally managed to pull his head out of his ass.”

Olive’s brain stuttered. Her neurons went sluggish and cold, and it took her several seconds to process that Adam had been wanting to ask her out for years. She couldn’t wrap her head around it, because . . . it was not possible. It didn’t make sense. Adam didn’t even remember Olive existed before she’d

Title-IXed him in the hallway a few weeks ago. The more she thought about it, the more she grew convinced that if he'd had any recollection of their bathroom meeting, he would have said as much. Adam was famously direct, after all.

Holden must have been referring to someone else. And Adam must have feelings for that someone. Someone he worked with, someone who was in their department. Someone who was "amazing."

Olive's mind, half frozen until a few seconds ago, began to spiral with the knowledge. Setting aside the fact that this conversation was an utter invasion of Adam's privacy, Olive couldn't stop herself from considering the implications of their arrangement for him. If the person Holden was talking about was one of Adam's colleagues, there was no chance that she hadn't heard about Adam and Olive dating. It was possible that she'd seen the two of them get coffee together on a Wednesday, or Olive sitting on Adam's lap during Tom's talk, or—God, Olive slathering him with sunblock at that godforsaken picnic. Which couldn't be good for his prospects. Unless Adam didn't mind, because he was sure beyond any doubt that his feelings were unrequited—and oh, wouldn't that be funny? About as funny as a Greek tragedy.

"Anyway." Holden pushed away from the wall, his hand coming up to scratch his nape. "I think we should go on a double date one of these days. I've been taking a break from dating—too much heartache—but maybe it's time to dip my toes in again. Hopefully I'll snatch myself a boyfriend soon."

The weight in Olive's stomach sank even lower. "That would be lovely." She attempted a smile.

"Right?" He grinned. "Adam would hate it with the intensity of a thousand suns."

He really would.

“But I could tell you so many juicy stories about him, approximately aged ten to twenty-five.” Holden was delighted at the prospect. “He’d be mortified.”

“Are they about taxidermy?”

“Taxidermy?”

“Nothing. Just something Tom had said about . . .” She waved her hand. “Nothing.”

Holden’s gaze turned sharp. “Adam said you might be going to work with Tom next year. Is that true?”

“Oh . . . yeah. That’s the plan.”

He nodded, pensive. Then seemed to come to some sort of decision and added, “Watch your back while you’re around him, okay?”

“My back?” What? Why? Did this have anything to do with what Adam had mentioned—Holden not liking Tom? “What do you mean?”

“Adam’s back, too. *Especially* Adam’s back.” Holden’s expression remained intense for a moment, and then lightened up. “Anyway. Tom only met Adam in grad school. But I was there in his teenage years—that’s when the good stories are from.”

“Oh. You probably shouldn’t tell me. Since . . .” *Since he’s faking a relationship with me and surely doesn’t want me in his business. Also, he’s probably in love with someone else.*

“Oh, of course. I’ll wait until he’s present. I want to see his face when I tell you everything about his newsboy-cap phase.”

She blinked. “His . . . ?”

He nodded solemnly and stepped out, closing the door behind him and leaving her alone in the chilly, semidark lab. Olive had to take several deep breaths before she could focus on her work.

WHEN SHE RECEIVED the email, she initially thought it must be an error. Maybe she'd misread—she hadn't been sleeping well, and as it turned out, having an unwanted, unreciprocated crush came with all sorts of scatter-headedness—though after a second look, then a third and a fourth, she realized that wasn't the case. So maybe the mistake was on the SBD conference's side. Because there was no way—absolutely *no way*—that they'd really meant to inform her that the abstract she'd submitted had been selected to be part of a panel.

A panel with faculty.

It was just not possible. Graduate students were rarely selected for oral presentations. Most of the time they just made posters with their findings. Talks were for scholars whose careers were already advanced—except that when Olive logged into the conference website and downloaded the program, her name was there. And out of all the speakers' names, hers was the only one not followed by any letters. No MD. No Ph.D. No MD-Ph.D.

Crap.

She ran out of the lab clutching her laptop to her chest. Greg gave her a dirty look when she almost crashed into him in the hallway, but she ignored him and stormed inside Dr. Aslan's office out of breath, her knees suddenly made of jelly.

"Can we talk?" She closed the door without waiting for an answer.

Her adviser looked up from behind her desk with an alarmed expression. "Olive, what is—"

"I don't want to give a talk. I can't give a talk." She shook her head, trying to sound reasonable but only managing panic-

stricken and frantic. “I *can’t*.”

Dr. Aslan cocked her head and steepled her hands. The veneer of calm her adviser projected was usually comforting, but now it made Olive want to flip the nearest piece of furniture.

Calm down. Deep breaths. Use your mindfulness and all that stuff Malcolm’s always yapping his mouth about. “Dr. Aslan, my SBD abstract was accepted as a talk. Not as a poster, a *talk*. Out loud. On a panel. Standing. In front of *people*.” Olive’s voice had made its way to a shriek. And yet, for reasons beyond understanding, Dr. Aslan’s face split into a grin.

“This is wonderful news!”

Olive blinked. And then blinked again. “It’s . . . not?”

“Nonsense.” Dr. Aslan stood and walked around her desk, running her hand up and down Olive’s arm in what she clearly intended as a congratulatory gesture. “This is fantastic. A talk will give you much more visibility than a poster. You might be able to network for a postdoctoral position. I am so, *so* happy for you.”

Olive’s jaw dropped. “But . . .”

“But?”

“I cannot give a talk. I can’t *talk*.”

“You’re talking right now, Olive.”

“Not in front of people.”

“I am people.”

“You’re not *many* people. Dr. Aslan, I can’t talk in front of a lot of people. Not about science.”

“Why?”

“Because.” *Because my throat will dry up and my brain will shut down and I will be so bad that someone from the audience will take out a crossbow and shoot me in the kneecap.* “I’m not ready. To speak. In public.”

“Of course you are. You’re a good public speaker.”

“I’m not. I stammer. I blush. I meander. A lot. Especially in front of large crowds, and—”

“Olive,” Dr. Aslan interrupted her with a stern tone. “What do I always tell you?”

“Um . . . ‘Don’t misplace the multichannel pipette’?”

“The other thing.”

She sighed. “ ‘Carry yourself with the confidence of a mediocre white man.’ ”

“More than that, if possible. Since there is absolutely nothing mediocre about you.”

Olive closed her eyes and took enough deep breaths to pull back from the verge of a panic attack. When she opened them, her adviser was smiling encouragingly.

“Dr. Aslan.” Olive grimaced. “I *really* don’t think I can do this.”

“I know you don’t.” There was some sadness in her expression. “But you can. And we’ll work together until you feel up to the task.” This time, she put both her hands on Olive’s shoulders. Olive was still hugging her laptop to her chest, like she would a life buoy in the open sea, but the touch was oddly comforting. “Don’t worry. We have a couple of weeks to get you ready.”

You say that. You say “we,” but I’ll be the one to speak in front of hundreds of people, and when someone asks a three-minute-long question meant to get me to admit that deep down my work is poorly structured and useless, I’ll be the one to

crap her pants. "Right." Olive had to force her head into an up-and-down motion and take a deep breath. She exhaled slowly. "Okay."

"Why don't you put together a draft? You could practice during the next lab meeting." Another reassuring smile, and Olive was nodding again, not feeling reassured in the least. "And if you have any questions, I'm always here. Oh, I am so disappointed that I won't get to see your talk. You must promise to record it for me. It will be just as if I was there."

Except that you won't be there, and I'll be alone, she thought bitterly while closing the door of Dr. Aslan's office behind her. She slumped against the wall and squeezed her eyes shut, trying to quiet the agitated mess of thoughts fluttering inside her head. And then she opened them again when she heard her name in Malcolm's voice. He was standing in front of her with Anh, studying her with a half-amused, half-worried expression. They were holding Starbucks cups. The smell of caramel and peppermint wafted over, making her stomach churn.

"Hey."

Anh took a sip of her drink. "Why are you taking a standing nap next to your adviser's office?"

"I . . ." Olive pushed away from the wall and walked a few steps away from Dr. Aslan's door, rubbing her nose with the back of her hand. "My abstract got accepted. The SBD one."

"Congrats!" Anh smiled. "But that was pretty much a given, right?"

"It was accepted as a *talk*."

For a few seconds, two pairs of eyes just stared at her in silence. Olive thought that Malcolm might be wincing, but when she turned to check, there was just a vague smile pasted on his face. "That's . . . awesome?"

“Yeah.” Anh’s eyes darted to Malcolm and back to Olive. “That’s, um, great.”

“It’s a disaster of epic proportions.”

Anh and Malcolm exchanged a worried glance. They knew very well how Olive felt about public speaking.

“What is Dr. Aslan saying about it?”

“The usual.” She rubbed her eyes. “That it will be fine. That we’ll work on it together.”

“I think she’s right,” Anh said. “I’ll help you practice. We’ll make sure you know it by heart. And it *will* be fine.”

“Yeah.” *Or it won’t*. “Also, the conference is in less than two weeks. We should book the hotel—or are we doing Airbnb?”

Something odd happened the moment she asked the question. Not with Anh—she was still peacefully sipping on her coffee—but Malcolm’s cup froze halfway to his mouth, and he bit his lip while studying the sleeve of his sweater.

“About that . . . ,” he began.

Olive frowned. “What?”

“Well.” Malcolm shuffled his feet a little, and maybe it was accidental, the way he seemed to be drifting away from Olive—but she didn’t think so. “We already have.”

“You already booked something?”

Anh nodded cheerfully. “Yes.” She didn’t appear to notice that Malcolm was about to have a stroke. “The conference hotel.”

“Oh. Okay. Let me know what I owe you then, since—”

“The thing is . . .” Malcolm seemed to move even farther away.

“What thing?”

“Well.” He fidgeted with the cardboard holder of his cup, and his eyes darted to Anh, who seemed blissfully oblivious to his discomfort. “Jeremy’s hotel room is paid for because of that fellowship he’s on, and he asked Anh to stay with him. And then Jess, Cole, and Hikaru offered for me to stay with them.”

“What?” Olive glanced at Anh. “Seriously?”

“It will save all of us a lot of money. And it will be my first trip with Jeremy,” Anh interjected distractedly. She was typing something on her phone. “Oh my God, guys, I think I found it! A location for the Boston event for BIPOC women in STEM! I think I’ve got it!”

“That’s great,” Olive said weakly. “But I thought . . . I thought we’d room together.”

Anh glanced up, looking contrite. “Yeah, I know. That’s what I told Jeremy, but he pointed out that you . . . you know.” Olive tilted her head, confused, and Anh continued, “I mean, why would you want to spend money on a room when you could stay with Carlsen?”

Oh. “Because.” Because. Because, because, *because*. “I . . .”

“I’ll miss you, but it’s not as if we’ll be in the rooms for anything other than sleeping.”

“Right. . . .” She pressed her lips together, and added, “Sure.”

Anh’s grin made her want to groan. “Awesome. We’ll get meals together and hang out for poster sessions. And at night, of course.”

“Of course.” It was all Olive could do not to sound bitter. “I look forward to it,” she added with as good a smile as she could muster.

“Okay. Great. I gotta go—the Women in Science outreach committee is meeting in five. But let’s get together this weekend to plan fun activities for Boston. Jeremy said something about a ghost tour!”

Olive waited until Anh was out of earshot before turning to face Malcolm. He was already raising his hands defensively.

“First of all, Anh came up with this plan while I was monitoring that twenty-four-hour experiment—worst day of my life, I *cannot* graduate soon enough. And after that—what was I supposed to do? Inform her that you’re not going to stay with Carlsen because you’re fake-dating? Oh, but wait—now that you’ve got a huge crush on him maybe it’s sort of real—”

“Okay, I get it.” Her stomach was starting to ache. “You still could have told me.”

“I was going to. And then I dumped Neuro Jude and he went crazy and egged my car. And after that my dad called me to say hi and asked me about how my projects are going, which devolved into him grilling me on why I’m not using a *C. elegans* model, and, Ol, you know how incredibly nosy and micromanaging he can be, which led to us having an argument and my mom got involved and—” He stopped and took a deep breath. “Well, you were there. You heard the screams. Bottom line is, it totally slipped my mind, and I’m so sorry.”

“It’s fine.” She scratched her temple. “I’m going to have to find someplace to stay.”

“I’ll help you,” Malcolm told her eagerly. “We can look online tonight.”

“Thanks, but don’t worry about it. I’ll manage.” Or not. Probably. Likely. Since the conference was in less than two weeks, and everything was likely already booked up. What was left was undoubtedly so out of her price range, she’d have to sell a kidney to be able to afford it. Which could be an option—she did have two.

"You're not mad, right?"

"I . . ." *Yes. No. Maybe a little.* "No. It's not your fault." She hugged Malcolm back when he leaned into her, reassuring him with a few awkward pats on the shoulder. As much as she'd have liked to blame him for this, she only had to look at herself. The crux of her problems—most of them, at least—was her moronic, harebrained decision to lie to Anh in the first place. To begin this fake-dating sham. Now she was giving a *talk* at this stupid conference, probably after sleeping at a bus station and eating moss for breakfast, and despite all of this she couldn't stop thinking about Adam. Just perfect.

Laptop under her arm, Olive headed back to the lab, the prospect of getting her slides in order for her talk simultaneously daunting and depressing. There was something leaden and unpleasant weighing on her stomach, and on impulse she made a detour to the restroom and entered the stall farthest from the door, leaning against the wall until the back of her head hit the cold tile surface.

When the weight in her belly began to feel too heavy, her knees gave out on her and her back slid down until she sat on the floor. Olive stayed like that for a long time, trying to pretend that this wasn't her life.

Chapter Thirteen

HYPOTHESIS: *Approximately two out of three fake-dating situations will eventually involve room-sharing; 50 percent of room-sharing situations will be further complicated by the presence of only one bed.*

There was an Airbnb twenty-five minutes from the conference center, but it was an inflatable mattress on the floor of a storage room, charging 180 bucks per night, and even if she could have afforded it, one of the reviews reported that the host had a penchant for role-playing Viking with the guests, so . . . No, thank you. She found a more affordable one forty-five minutes away by subway, but when she went to reserve the room, she discovered that someone had beaten her to it by mere seconds, and she was tempted to hurl her laptop across the coffee shop. She was trying to decide between a seedy motel and a cheap couch in the suburbs when a shadow cast over her. She looked up with a frown, expecting an undergrad wanting to use the outlet she'd been hoarding, and instead found . . .

"Oh."

Adam was standing in front of her, the late-afternoon sunlight haloing his hair and shoulders, fingers closed around an iPad as he looked down at her with a somber expression. It had been less than a week since she'd last seen him—six days to be precise, which was just a handful of hours and minutes. Nothing, considering that she'd barely known him a month. And yet it was as if the space she was in, the whole campus, the entire city was transformed by knowing that he was back.

Possibilities. That's what Adam's presence felt like. Of what, she was not certain.

"You're . . ." Her mouth was dry. An event of great scientific interest, considering that she'd taken a sip from her water bottle maybe ten seconds ago. "You're back."

"I am."

She hadn't forgotten his voice. Or his height. Or the way his stupid clothes fit him. She couldn't have—she had two medial temporal lobes, fully functioning and tucked nicely inside her skull, which meant that she was perfectly able to encode and store memories. She hadn't forgotten anything, and she wasn't sure why right now it felt as if she had. "I thought . . . I didn't—" *Yes, Olive. Wonderful. Very eloquent.* "I didn't know that you were back."

His face was a little closed off, but he nodded. "I flew in last night."

"Oh." She should have probably prepared something to say, but she hadn't expected to see him until Wednesday. If she had, maybe she wouldn't have been wearing her oldest leggings and most tattered T-shirt, and her hair wouldn't have been a mess. Not that she was under any illusion that Adam would have noticed her if she'd been wearing a swimsuit or a gala dress. But still. "Do you want to sit?" She leaned forward to gather her phone and notebook, making room on the other side of the small table. It was only when he hesitated before taking a seat that it occurred to her that maybe he had no intention of staying, that now he might feel forced to do so. He folded himself into the chair gracefully, like a big cat.

Great job, Olive. Who doesn't love a needy person who hounds them for attention?

"You don't have to. I know you're busy. MacArthur grants to win and grads to brutalize and broccoli to eat." He'd

probably rather be anywhere else. She bit her thumbnail, feeling guilty, starting to panic, and—

And then he smiled. And suddenly there were grooves around his mouth and dimples in his cheeks and his face was completely altered by them. The air at the table thinned. Olive couldn't quite breathe.

"You know, there's a middle ground between living off brownies and exclusively eating broccoli."

She grinned, for no reason other than—Adam was *here*, with *her*. And he was *smiling*. "That's a lie."

He shook his head, mouth still curved. "How are you?"

Better now. "Good. How was Boston?"

"Good."

"I'm glad you're back. I'm pretty sure the biology dropout rates have seen a steep reduction. We can't have that."

He gave her a patient, put-upon look. "You look tired, smart-ass."

"Oh. Yeah, I . . ." She rubbed her cheek with her hand, ordering herself not to feel self-conscious about her looks, just like she'd always made a point not to. It would be an equally stupid idea to wonder what the woman Holden mentioned the other day looked like. Probably stunning. Probably feminine, with curves; someone who actually needed to wear a bra, someone who was not half covered in freckles, who had mastered the art of applying liquid eyeliner without making a mess of herself.

"I'm fine. It's been a week, though." She massaged her temple.

He cocked his head. "What happened?"

"Nothing . . . My friends are stupid, and I hate them." She felt instantly guilty and made a face. "Actually, I don't hate

them. I do hate that I love them, though."

"Is this the sunscreen friend? Anh?"

"The one and only. And my roommate, too, who really should know better."

"What did they do?"

"They . . ." Olive pressed into both eyes with her fingers. "It's a long story. They found alternative accommodations for SBD. Which means that now I have to find a place on my own."

"Why did they do that?"

"Because . . ." She briefly closed her eyes and sighed. "Because they assumed that I'd want to stay with you. Since you're my . . . you know. 'Boyfriend.' "

He went still for a couple of seconds. And then: "I see."

"Yep. A pretty bold assumption, but . . ." She spread her arms and shrugged.

He bit the inside of his cheek, looking pensive. "I'm sorry you won't get to room with them."

She waved her hand. "Oh, that's not it. That would have been fun, but it's just that now I need to find something else nearby, and there are no affordable options." Her eyes fell on the screen of her laptop. "I'm thinking of booking this motel that's an hour away and—"

"Won't they know?"

She looked up from the grainy, shady-looking picture of the place. "Mm?"

"Won't Anh know that you're not staying with me?"

Oh. "Where are you staying?"

"The conference hotel."

Of course. “Well.” She scratched her nose. “I wouldn’t tell her. I don’t think she’ll pay too much attention.”

“But she’ll notice if you’re staying one hour away.”

“I . . .” Yes. They would notice, and ask questions, and Olive would have to come up with a bunch of excuses and even more half-truths to deal with it. Add a few blocks to this Jenga tower of lies she’d been building for weeks. “I’ll figure it out.”

He nodded slowly. “I’m sorry.”

“Oh, it’s not your fault.”

“One could argue that it is, in fact, my fault.”

“Not at all.”

“I would offer to pay for your hotel room, but I doubt there’s anything left in a ten-mile radius.”

“Oh, no.” She shook her head emphatically. “And I wouldn’t accept it. It’s not a cup of coffee. And a scone. And a cookie. And a pumpkin Frappuccino.” She batted her eyes at him and leaned forward, trying to change the topic. “Which, by the way, is new on the menu. You could totally buy it for me, and that would make my day.”

“Sure.” He looked slightly nauseous.

“Awesome.” She grinned. “I think it’s cheaper today, some kind of Tuesday sale, so—”

“But you could room with me.”

The way he put it forward, calm and sensible, almost made it sound like it was no big deal. And Olive almost fell for it, until her ears and brain seemed to finally connect with each other and she was able to process the meaning of what he’d just said.

That she.

Could room.

With him.

Olive knew full well what sharing quarters with someone entailed, even for a very short period. Sleeping in the same room meant seeing embarrassing pajamas, taking turns to use the bathroom, hearing the swish of someone trying to find a comfortable position under the sheets loud and clear in the dark. Sleeping in the same room meant— No. Nope. It was a terrible idea. And Olive was starting to think that maybe she had maxed those out for a while. So she cleared her throat.

"I could not, actually."

He nodded calmly. But then, then he asked equally calmly, "Why?" and she wanted to bang her head against the table.

"I couldn't."

"The room is a double, of course," he offered, as if that piece of information could have possibly changed her mind.

"It's not a good idea."

"Why?"

"Because people will think that we . . ." She noticed Adam's look and immediately hushed. "Okay, *fine*. They already think that. But."

"But?"

"Adam." She rubbed her forehead with her fingers. "There will be only one bed."

He frowned. "No, as I said it's a double—"

"It's not. It won't be. There will be only one bed, for sure."

He gave her a puzzled look. "I got the booking confirmation the other day. I can forward it to you if you want; it says that—"

"It doesn't matter what it says. It's *always* one bed."

He stared at her, perplexed, and she sighed and leaned helplessly against the back of her chair. He'd clearly never seen a rom-com or read a romance novel in his life. "Nothing. Ignore me."

"My symposium is part of a satellite workshop the day before the conference starts, and then I'll be speaking on the first day of the actual conference. I have the room for the entire conference, but I'll probably need to leave for some meetings after night two, so you'd be by yourself from night three. We'd only overlap for one night."

She listened to the logical, methodical way he listed sensible reasons why she should just accept his offer and felt a wave of panic sweep over her. "It seems like a bad idea."

"That's fine. I just don't understand why."

"Because." *Because I don't want to. Because I have it bad. Because I'd probably have it even worse, after that. Because it's going to be the week of September twenty-ninth, and I've been trying hard not to think about it.*

"Are you afraid that I'll try to kiss you without your consent? To sit on your lap, or fondle you under the pretext of applying sunscreen? Because I would never—"

Olive chucked her phone at him. He caught it in his left hand, studied its glitter amino-acid case with a pleased expression, and then carefully set it next to her laptop.

"I hate you," She told him, sullen. She might have been pouting. And smiling at the same time.

His mouth twitched. "I know."

"Am I ever going to live that stuff down?"

"Unlikely. And if you do, I'm sure something else will come up."

She huffed, crossing her arms over her chest, and they exchanged a small smile.

"I can ask Holden or Tom if I can stay with them, and leave you my room," he suggested. "But they know that I already have one, so I'd have to come up with excuses—"

"No, I'm not going to kick you out of your room." She ran a hand through her hair and exhaled. "You'd hate it."

He tilted his head. "What?"

"Rooming with me."

"I would?"

"Yeah. You seem like a person who . . ." *You seem like you like to keep others at arm's length, uncompromising and ever so hard to know. You seem like you care very little about what people think of you. You seem like you know what you're doing. You seem equally horrible and awesome, and just the thought that there's someone you'd like to open up to, someone who's not me, makes me feel like I can't sit at this table any longer.* "Like you'd want your own space."

He held her gaze. "Olive. I think I'll be fine."

"But if you end up *not* being fine, then you'd be stuck with me."

"It's one night." His jaw clenched and relaxed, and he added, "We are friends, no?"

Her own words, thrown back at her. *I don't want to be your friend*, she was tempted to say. Thing was, she also didn't want to *not* be his friend. What she wanted was completely outside of her ability to obtain, and she needed to forget it. Scrap it from her brain.

"Yes. We are."

"Then, as a friend, don't force me to worry about you using public transportation late at night in a city you're not familiar

with. Biking on roads without bike lanes is bad enough," he muttered, and she immediately felt a weight sink into her stomach. He was trying to be a good friend. He cared for her, and instead of being satisfied with what she currently had, she had to ruin it all and—and want more.

She took a deep breath. "Are you sure? That it wouldn't bother you?"

He nodded, silent.

"Okay, then. Okay." She forced herself to smile. "Do you snore?"

He huffed out a laugh. "I don't know."

"Oh, come on. How can you not know?"

He shrugged. "I just don't."

"Well, that probably means you don't. Otherwise, someone would have told you."

"Someone?"

"A roommate." It occurred to her that Adam was thirty-four and likely hadn't had a roommate in about a decade. "Or a girlfriend."

He smiled faintly and lowered his gaze. "I guess my 'girlfriend' will tell me after SBD, then." He said it in a quiet, unassuming tone, clearly trying to make a joke, but Olive's cheeks warmed, and she couldn't quite bear to look at him anymore. Instead she picked at a thread on the sleeve of her cardigan, and searched for something to say.

"My stupid abstract." She cleared her throat. "It was accepted as a talk."

He met her eyes. "Faculty panel?"

"Yeah."

"You're not happy?"

“No.” She winced.

“Is it the public-speaking thing?”

He’d remembered. Of course he had. “Yeah. It will be awful.”

Adam stared at her and said nothing. Not that it would be fine, not that the talk would go smoothly, not that she was overreacting and underselling a fantastic opportunity. His calm acceptance of her anxiety had the exact opposite effect of Dr. Aslan’s enthusiasm: it relaxed her.

“When I was in my third year of grad school,” he said quietly, “my adviser sent me to give a faculty symposium in his stead. He told me only two days before, without any slides or a script. Just the title of the talk.”

“Wow.” Olive tried to imagine what that would have felt like, being expected to perform something so daunting with so little forewarning. At the same time, part of her marveled at Adam self-disclosing something without being asked a direct question. “Why did he do that?”

“Who knows?” He tilted his head back, staring at a spot above her head. His tone held a trace of bitterness. “Because he had an emergency. Because he thought it’d be a formative experience. Because he could.”

Olive just bet that he could. She didn’t know Adam’s former adviser, but academia was very much an old boys’ club, where those who held the power liked to take advantage of those who didn’t without repercussions.

“Was it? A formative experience?”

He shrugged again. “As much as anything that keeps you awake in a panic for forty-eight hours straight can be.”

Olive smiled. “And how did you do?”

“I did . . .” He pressed his lips together. “Not well enough.” He was silent for a long moment, his gaze locked somewhere outside the café’s window. “Then again, nothing was ever good enough.”

It seemed impossible that someone might look at Adam’s scientific accomplishments and find them lacking. That he could ever be anything less than the best at what he did. Was that why he was so severe in his judgment of others? Because he’d been taught to set the same impossible standards for himself?

“Do you still keep in touch with him? Your adviser, I mean.”

“He’s retired now. Tom has taken over what used to be his lab.”

It was such an uncharacteristically opaque, carefully worded answer. Olive couldn’t help being curious. “Did you like him?”

“It’s complicated.” He rubbed a hand over his jaw, looking pensive and far away. “No. No, I didn’t like him. I still don’t. He was . . .” It took him so long to continue, she almost convinced herself that he wouldn’t. But he did, staring at the late-afternoon sunlight disappearing behind the oak trees. “Brutal. My adviser was brutal.”

She chuckled, and Adam’s eyes darted back to her face, narrow with confusion.

“Sorry.” She was still laughing a little. “It’s just funny, to hear you complain about your old mentor. Because . . .”

“Because?”

“Because he sounds exactly like you.”

“I’m not like him,” he retorted, more sharply than Olive had come to expect from him. It made her snort.

“Adam, I’m pretty sure that if we were to ask anyone to describe you with one word, ‘brutal’ would come up one or ten times.”

She saw him stiffen before she was even done speaking, the line of his shoulders suddenly tense and rigid, his jaw tight and with a slight twitch to it. Her first instinct was to apologize, but she was not sure for what. There was nothing new to what she’d just told him—they’d discussed his blunt, uncompromising mentoring style before, and he’d always taken it in stride. Owned it, even. And yet his fists were clenched on the table, and his eyes were darker than usual.

“I . . . Adam, did I—” she stammered, but he interrupted her before she could continue.

“Everyone has issues with their advisers,” he said, and there was a finality to his tone that warned her not to finish her sentence. Not to ask *What happened? Where did you just go?*

So she swallowed and nodded. “Dr. Aslan is . . .” She hesitated. His knuckles were not quite as white anymore, and the tension in his muscles was slowly dissolving. It was possible that she’d imagined it. Yes, she must have. “She’s great. But sometimes I feel like she doesn’t really understand that I need more . . .” Guidance. Support. Some practical advice, instead of blind encouragement. “I’m not even sure what I need, myself. I think that might be part of the problem—I’m not very good at communicating it.”

He nodded and appeared to choose his words carefully. “It’s hard, mentoring. No one teaches you how to do it. We’re trained to become scientists, but as professors, we’re also in charge of making sure that students learn to produce rigorous science. I hold my grads accountable, and I set high standards for them. They’re scared of me, and that’s fine. The stakes are high, and if being scared means that they’re taking their training seriously, then I’m okay with it.”

She tilted her head. “What do you mean?”

“My job is to make sure that my adult graduate students don’t become mediocre scientists. That means I’m the one who’s tasked with demanding that they rerun their experiments or adjust their hypotheses. It comes with the territory.”

Olive had never been a people pleaser, but Adam’s attitude toward others’ perception of him was so cavalier, it was almost fascinating. “Do you really not care?” she asked, curious. “That your grads might dislike you as a person?”

“Nah. I don’t like them very much, either.” She thought of Jess and Alex and the other half a dozen grads and postdocs mentored by Adam whom she didn’t know very well. The thought of him finding them as annoying as they found him despotic made her chuckle. “To be fair, I don’t like people in general.”

“Right.” *Don’t ask, Olive. Do not ask.* “Do you like me?”

A millisecond of hesitation as he pressed his lips together. “Nope. You’re a smart-ass with abysmal taste in beverages.” He traced the corner of his iPad, a small smile playing on his lips. “Send me your slides.”

“My slides?”

“For your talk. I’ll take a look at them.”

Olive tried not to gape at him. “Oh—you . . . I’m not your grad. You don’t have to.”

“I know.”

“You really don’t have to—”

“I want to,” he said, voice pitched low and even as he looked into her eyes, and Olive had to avert her gaze because something felt too tight in her chest.

“Okay.” She finally managed to snap out the loose thread on her sleeve. “How likely is it that your feedback will cause

me to cry under the shower?"

"That depends on the quality of your slides."

She smiled. "Don't feel like you have to hold back."

"Believe me, I don't."

"Good. Great." She sighed, but it was reassuring, knowing that he was going to be checking her work. "Will you come to my talk?" she heard herself ask, and was as surprised by the request as Adam seemed to be.

"I . . . Do you want me to?"

No. No, it's going to be horrible, and humiliating, and probably a disaster, and you're going to see me at my worst and weakest. It's probably best if you lock yourself into the bathroom for the entire duration of the panel. Just so you don't accidentally wander in and see me making a fool of myself.

And yet. Just the idea of having him there, sitting in the audience, made the prospect seem like less of an ordeal. He was not her adviser, and he wasn't going to be able to do much if she got inundated by a barrage of impossible questions, or if the projector stopped working halfway through the talk. But maybe that wasn't what she needed from him.

It hit her then what was so special about Adam. That no matter his reputation, or how rocky their first meeting, since the very beginning, Olive had felt that he was on her side. Over and over, and in ways that she could never have anticipated, he had made her feel unjudged. Less alone.

She exhaled slowly. The realization should have been rattling, but it had an oddly calming effect. "Yes," she told him, thinking that this might very well turn out to be all right. She might never have what she wanted from Adam, but for now at least, he was in her life. That was going to have to be enough.

“I will, then.”

She leaned forward. “Will you ask a long-winded, leading question that will cause me to ramble incoherently and lose the respect of my peers, thus forever undermining my place in the field of biology?”

“Possibly.” He was smiling. “Should I buy you that disgusting”—Adam gestured toward the register—“pumpkin sludge now?”

She grinned. “Oh, yes. I mean, if you want to.”

“I’d rather buy you anything else.”

“Too bad.” Olive jumped to her feet and headed for the counter, tugging at his sleeve and forcing him to stand with her. Adam followed meekly, mumbling something about black coffee that Olive chose to ignore.

Enough, she repeated to herself. *What you have now, it will have to be enough.*

Chapter Fourteen

HYPOTHESIS: *This conference will be the worst thing to ever happen to my professional career, general well-being, and sense of sanity.*

There were two beds in the hotel room.

Two double beds to be precise, and as she stared at them, Olive felt her shoulders sag with relief and had to resist the urge to fist-pump. *Take that, you stupid rom-coms.* She may have fallen for the dude she'd begun to fake-date like some born-yesterday fool, but at least she wouldn't be sharing a bed with him any time soon. Given her disastrous past couple of weeks, she'd really, really needed the win.

There were a number of little clues that Adam had slept on the bed closest to the entrance—a book on the bedside table in a language that looked like German, a thumb drive and the same iPad she'd seen him carry around on several occasions, an iPhone charger dangling from the power outlet. A suitcase tucked by the foot of the bed, black and expensive-looking. Unlike Olive's, it probably hadn't been fished out of the Walmart bargain bin.

"I guess this is mine, then," she murmured, sitting on the bed closest to the window and bouncing a few times to test the firmness of the mattress. It was a nice room. Not ridiculously fancy, but Olive was suddenly grateful for the way Adam had snorted and looked at her like she was crazy when she'd offered to pay for half of it. At least the place was wide enough that they weren't going to have to brush up against each other every time they moved around. Staying in here with

him wouldn't feel like a singularly sadistic version of seven minutes in heaven.

Not that they'd be together much. She was going to give her talk in a couple of hours—*ugh*—then go to the department's social and hang out with her friends until . . . well, as long as she feasibly could. Odds were that Adam already had tons of meetings scheduled, and maybe they wouldn't even see each other. Olive would be asleep when he came back tonight, and tomorrow morning one of them would pretend not to wake up while the other got ready. It was going to be fine. Harmless. At the very least, not make things worse than they currently were.

Olive's usual conference outfit was black jeans and her least-frayed cardigan, but a few days ago Anh had mentioned that the ensemble might be too casual for a talk. After sighing for hours Olive had decided to bring the black wrap dress she'd bought on sale before interviewing for grad school and black pumps borrowed from Anh's sister. It had seemed like a good idea at the time, but as soon as she slipped into the bathroom to put on the dress, she realized that it must have shrunk the last time she washed it. It didn't quite hit her knees anymore, not by a couple of inches. She groaned and snapped a picture for Anh and Malcolm, who texted her, respectively, Still conference appropriate and a fire emoji. Olive prayed that Anh was right as she combed the waves in her hair and fought against dried-out mascara—her fault for buying makeup at the dollar store, clearly.

She had just got out of the bathroom, rehearsing her talk under her breath, when the door opened and someone—Adam, of course it was *Adam*—entered the room. He was holding his key card and typing something in his phone, but stopped as soon as he looked up and noticed Olive. His mouth opened, and—

That was it. It just stayed open.

“Hey.” Olive forced her face into a smile. Her heart was doing something weird in her chest. Beating a little too quickly. She should probably have it checked as soon as she got back home. One could never be too careful about cardiovascular health. “Hi.”

He snapped his mouth closed and cleared his throat. “You’re . . .” He swallowed and shifted on his feet. “Here.”

“Yep.” She nodded, still smiling. “Just arrived. My flight landed on time, surprisingly.”

Adam seemed a little slow. Maybe jet-lagged from his own flight, or perhaps last night he’d been out late with his famous scientist friends, or with the mysterious woman Holden had talked about. He just stared at Olive, silent for several moments, and when he spoke, it was only to say, “You look . . .”

She glanced down at her dress and heels, wondering if her eye makeup was already smudged. She’d put it on three whole minutes ago, so it was more than likely. “Professional?”

“That’s not what I . . .” Adam closed his eyes and shook his head, as if collecting himself. “But, yes. You do. How are you?”

“Good. Fine. I mean, I wish I were dead. But aside from that.”

He laughed silently and moved closer. “You’ll be okay.” She had thought sweaters were a good look for him, but only because she’d never seen him wear a blazer. *He had a secret weapon all along*, she thought, trying not to stare too hard. *And now he’s unleashing it. Damn him.*

“Agreed.” She pushed her hair back and smiled. “After I die.”

“You’re fine. You have a script. You memorized it. Your slides are good.”

“I think they were better before you made me change the PowerPoint background.”

“It was acid green.”

“I know. It made me happy.”

“It made *me* nauseous.”

“Mm. Anyway, thanks again for helping me figure it out.” *And for answering the 139 questions I asked. Thank you for taking less than ten minutes to reply to my emails, every time, even when it was 5:30 a.m. and you misspelled “consensus,” which is unusual of you and makes me suspect that maybe you were still half asleep.* “And for letting me crash with you.”

“No problem.”

She scratched the side of her nose. “I figured you were using that bed, so I put my stuff here, but if you . . .” She gestured confusedly at the room.

“No, that’s where I slept last night.”

“Okay.” She was *not* counting how many inches there were between the two beds. Definitely not. “So how’s the conference so far?”

“Same old. I was mostly at Harvard for a few meetings with Tom. I only got back for lunch.”

Olive’s stomach rumbled loudly at the mention of food.

“You okay?”

“Yeah. I think I forgot to eat today.”

His eyebrows arched. “I didn’t think you capable.”

“Hey!” She glared at him. “The sustained levels of despair I’ve been engaging in for the past week require a staggering number of calories, in case you— What are you doing?”

Adam was leaning over his suitcase, rummaging for something that he held out to Olive.

“What is it?”

“Calories. To fuel your despair habits.”

“Oh.” She accepted it and then studied the protein bar in her hands, trying not to burst out crying. It was just food. Probably a snack he’d brought for the plane ride and ended up not eating. He didn’t need to despair, after all. He was Dr. Adam Carlsen. “Thanks. Are you . . .” The wrapping of the bar crinkled as she shifted it from one hand to another. “Are you still coming to my talk?”

“Of course. When is it exactly?”

“Today at four, room 278. Session three-b. The good news is that it partially overlaps with the keynote address, which means that hopefully only a handful of people will show up . . .”

His spine stiffened noticeably. Olive hesitated.

“Unless you were planning to go to the keynote address?”

Adam wet his lips. “I . . .”

Her eyes chose that precise moment to fall to the conference badge dangling from his neck.

Adam Carlsen, Ph.D.

Stanford University

Keynote Speaker

Her jaw dropped.

“Oh my God.” She looked up at him, wide-eyed, and . . . Oh *God*. At least he had the grace to look sheepish. “How did you *not* tell me that you are the keynote speaker?”

Adam scratched his jaw, oozing discomfort. “I didn’t think of it.”

“Oh my God,” she repeated.

To be fair, it was on her. The name of the keynote speaker was likely printed in font size 300 in the program, and all the promotional material, not to mention the conference app and the emails. Olive must have had her head very much up her butt to fail to notice.

“Adam.” She made to rub her eyes with her fingers, and then thought better of it. Damn makeup. “I can’t be fake-dating SBD’s keynote speaker.”

“Well, there are technically three keynote speakers, and the other two are married women in their fifties who live in Europe and Japan, so—”

Olive crossed her arms on her chest and gave him a flat look until he quieted. She couldn’t help laughing. “How did this not come up?”

“It’s not a big deal.” He shrugged. “I doubt I was their first choice.”

“Right.” Sure. Because a person existed who’d refuse to be keynote speaker at SBD. She tilted her head. “Did you think I was an idiot, when I started complaining about my ten-minute talk that will be attended by fourteen and a half people?”

“Not at all. Your reaction was understandable.” He thought about it for a moment. “I do sometimes think you’re an idiot, mostly when I see you put ketchup and cream cheese on bagels.”

“It’s a great mix.”

He looked pained. “When are you presenting in your panel? Maybe I can still make it.”

“No. I’m exactly halfway through.” She waved a hand, hoping to seem unconcerned. “It’s fine, really.” And it was. “I’m going to have to record myself with my iPhone, anyway.”

She rolled her eyes. “For Dr. Aslan. She couldn’t come to the conference, but she said she wants to listen to my first talk. I can send it to you, if you’re a fan of stammering and secondhand embarrassment.”

“I’d like that.”

Olive flushed and changed the topic. “Is that why you have a room for the entire length of the conference even though you’re not staying? Because you’re a big shot?”

He frowned. “I’m not.”

“Can I call you ‘big shot’ from now on?”

He sighed, walking to the bedside table and pocketing the USB she’d noticed earlier. “I have to take my slides downstairs, smart-ass.”

“Okay.” He could leave. It was fine. Totally fine. Olive didn’t let her smile falter. “I guess I’ll maybe see you after my talk, then?”

“Of course.”

“And after yours. Good luck. And congrats. It’s such a huge honor.”

Adam didn’t seem to be thinking about that, though. He lingered by the door, his hand on the knob as he looked back at Olive. Their eyes held for a few moments before he told her, “Don’t be nervous, okay?”

She pressed her lips together and nodded. “I’ll just do what Dr. Aslan always says.”

“And what’s that?”

“Carry myself with the confidence of a mediocre white man.”

He grinned, and—there they were. The heart-stopping dimples. “It will be fine, Olive.” His smile softened. “And if

not, at least it will be over."

It wasn't until a few minutes later, when she was sitting on her bed staring at the Boston skyline and chewing on her lunch, that Olive realized that the protein bar Adam had given her was covered in chocolate.

SHE CHECKED WHETHER she had the correct room for the third time—nothing like talking about pancreatic cancer to a crowd that expected a presentation on the Golgi apparatus to make an impression—and then felt a hand close around her shoulder. She spun around, noticed who it belonged to, and immediately grinned.

"Tom!"

He was wearing a charcoal suit. His blond hair was combed back, making him look older than he had in California, but also professional. He was a friendly face in a sea of unfamiliar ones, and his presence took the edge off her intense desire to puke in her own shoe.

"Hey, Olive." He held the door open for her. "I thought I might see you here."

"Oh?"

"From the conference program." He looked at her oddly. "You didn't notice we're on the same panel?"

Oh, *crap*. "Uh—I . . . I didn't even read who else was on the panel." *Because I was too busy panicking.*

"No worries. It's mostly boring people." He winked, and his hand slid to her back, guiding her toward the podium. "Except for you and me, of course."

Her talk didn't go poorly.

It didn't go perfectly, either. She stumbled on the word "channelrhodopsin" twice, and by some weird trick of the projector her staining looked more like a black blob than a slice. "It looks different on my computer," Olive told the audience with a strained smile. "Just trust me on this one."

People chuckled, and she relaxed marginally, grateful that she'd spent hours upon hours memorizing everything she was supposed to say. The room was not as full as she'd feared, and there were a handful of people—likely working on similar projects at other institutions—who took notes and listened raptly to her every word. It should have been overwhelming and anxiety inducing, but about halfway through she realized that it made her oddly giddy, knowing that someone else was passionate about the same research questions that had taken up most of the past two years of her life.

In the second row, Malcolm faked a fascinated expression, while Anh, Jeremy, and a bunch of other grads from Stanford nodded enthusiastically whenever Olive happened to look in their direction. Tom alternated between staring intensely at her and checking his phone with a bored expression—fair, since he'd already read her report. The session was running late, and the moderator ended up giving her time for only one question—an easy one. At the end, two of the other panelists—well-known cancer researchers whom Olive had to restrain herself not to fangirl over—shook her hand and asked her several questions about her work. She was simultaneously flustered and overjoyed.

"You were so amazing," Anh told her when it was over, pushing up to hug her. "Also, you look hot and professional, and while you were talking, I had a vision of your future in academia."

Olive wrapped her arms around Anh. "What vision?"

“You were a high-powered researcher, surrounded by students who hung on your every word. And you were answering a multiparagraph email with an uncapitalized no.”

“Nice. Was I happy?”

“Of course not.” Anh snorted. “It’s academia.”

“Ladies, the department social starts in half an hour.” Malcolm leaned in to kiss Olive on the cheek and squeeze her waist. When she was wearing heels, he was just a tiny bit shorter than her. She definitely wanted a picture of the two of them side by side. “We should go celebrate the single time Olive managed to pronounce ‘channelrhodopsin’ right with some free booze.”

“You dick.”

He pulled her in for a tight hug and whispered in her ear, “You did amazing, Kalamata.” And then, louder: “Let’s go get wasted!”

“Why don’t you guys go ahead? I’ll get my USB and put my stuff back in the hotel.”

Olive made her way through the now-empty room to the podium, feeling like a huge weight had been lifted off her shoulders. She was relaxed and relieved. Professionally, things were starting to look up: as it turned out, with adequate preparation she could actually string together several coherent sentences in front of other scientists. She also had the means to carry out her research next year, and two big names in her field had just complimented her work. She smiled, letting her mind wander to whether she should text Adam to tell him that he was right, she did make it out alive; she should probably ask how his keynote address had gone, too. If his PowerPoint had acted up and he’d mispronounced words like “microarrays” or “karyotyping,” whether he planned to go to the department social. He was probably meeting up with

friends, but maybe she could buy him a thank-you drink for all his help. She would even pay, for once.

"It went well," someone said.

Olive turned to find Tom standing behind her, arms folded across his chest as he leaned against the table. He looked as though he'd been staring at her for a while. "Thank you. Yours, too." His talk had been a more condensed repeat of the one he'd given at Stanford, and Olive had to admit that she'd spaced out a bit.

"Where's Adam?" he asked.

"Still giving his keynote, I think."

"Right." Tom rolled his eyes. Probably with fondness, though Olive didn't quite catch it in his expression. "He does that, doesn't he?"

"Does what?"

"Outdoes you." He pushed away from the table, ambling closer. "Well, outdoes everyone. It's not personal." She frowned, confused, wanting to ask Tom what he meant by that, but he continued, "I think you and I will get along great next year."

The reminder that Tom believed in her work enough to take her in his lab quashed her discomfort. "We will." She smiled. "Thank you so much for giving me and my project a chance. I can't wait to start working with you."

"You're welcome." He was smiling, too. "I think there are a lot of things we can gain from each other. Wouldn't you agree?"

It seemed to Olive like she had much more to gain from it than he did, but she nodded anyway. "I hope so. I think imaging and blood biomarkers complement each other perfectly, and only by combining them can we—"

“And I have what you need, don’t I? The research funds. The lab space. The time and ability to mentor you properly.”

“Yes. You do. I . . .”

All of a sudden, she could pick out the gray rim of his cornea. Had he gotten closer? He was tall, but not that much taller than her. He didn’t usually feel *this* imposing.

“I’m grateful. So grateful. I’m sure that—”

She felt his unfamiliar smell in her nostrils, and his breath, hot and unpleasant against the corner of her mouth, and—fingers, a vise-tight grip around her upper arm, and why was he—what was he—

“What—” Heart in her throat, Olive freed her arm and took several steps back. “What are you *doing*?” Her hand came up to her biceps and—it *hurt*, where he’d clasped her.

God—had he really done that? Tried to kiss her? No, she must have imagined it. She must be going crazy, because Tom would never—

“A preview, I think.”

She just stared at him, too stunned and numb to react, until he moved closer and bent once more toward her. Then it was happening all over again.

She pushed him away. As forcefully as she could, she pushed him away with both her hands on his chest, until he stumbled back with a cruel, condescending laugh. Abruptly, her lungs seized and she couldn’t breathe.

“A preview of—what? Are you out of your mind?”

“Come on.”

Why was he smiling? Why was that oily, hateful expression on his face? Why was he looking at her like—

“A pretty girl like you should know the score by now.” He looked at her from head to toe, and the lewd gleam in his eyes made her feel disgusting. “Don’t lie to me and say you didn’t pick out a dress that short for my benefit. Nice legs, by the way. I can see why Adam’s wasting his time with you.”

“The— What are you—”

“Olive.” He sighed, putting his hands in his pockets. He should have looked nonthreatening, lounging like that. But he felt like anything but. “You don’t think I accepted you into my lab because you are good, do you?”

Slack-jawed, she took one more step back. One of her heels almost caught in the carpet, and she had to hold on to the table to avoid falling.

“A girl like you. Who figured out so early in her academic career that fucking well-known, successful scholars is how to get ahead.” He was still smiling. The same smile Olive had once thought kind. Reassuring. “You fucked Adam, didn’t you? We both know you’re going to fuck me for the same reason.”

She was going to vomit. She *was* going to vomit in this room, after all, and it had nothing to do with her talk. “You are disgusting.”

“Am I?” He shrugged, unperturbed. “That makes two of us. You used Adam to get to me and to my lab. To this conference, too.”

“I didn’t. I didn’t even *know* Adam when I submitted—”

“Oh, please. You’re telling me you thought your pitiful abstract was selected for a talk because of its quality and scientific importance?” He made a disbelieving face. “Someone here has a very high opinion of herself, considering that her research is useless and derivative and that she can barely put together two words without stuttering like an idiot.”

She froze. Her stomach sank and twisted, her feet cemented to the ground. “It’s not true,” she whispered.

“No? You think it’s not true that scientists in the field want to impress the great Adam Carlsen enough to kiss the ass of whoever he’s fucking at the moment? I certainly did when I told his very mediocre girlfriend that she could come work for me. But maybe you’re right,” he said, all mocking affability. “Maybe you know STEM academia better than I do.”

“I’m going to tell Adam about this. I’m going to—”

“By all means.” Tom widened his arms. “Go ahead. Be my guest. Do you need to borrow my phone?”

“No.” Her nostrils flared. A wave of icy anger swept over her. “No.” She turned around and marched to the entrance, fighting the nausea and bile climbing up her throat. She was going to find Adam. She was going to find the conference organizers and report Tom. She was never going to see his face again.

“Quick question. Who do you think Adam will believe, Olive?”

She halted abruptly, just a few feet from the door.

“Some bitch he’s been fucking for about two weeks, or someone who’s been a close friend for years? Someone who helped him get the most important grant of his career? Someone who’s had his back since he was younger than you are? Someone who’s actually a *good* scientist?”

She spun around, shaking with rage. “Why are you doing this?”

“Because I can.” Tom shrugged again. “Because as advantageous as my collaboration with Adam has been, sometimes it’s a bit annoying how he needs to be best at everything, and I like the idea of taking something away from him for once. Because you are very pretty, and I look forward

to spending more time with you next year. Who would have guessed that Adam had such good taste?"

"You are crazy. If you think that I'll work in your lab, you are—"

"Oh, Olive. But you will. Because you see—while your work is not particularly brilliant, it does complement nicely the ongoing projects in my lab."

She let out a single, bitter laugh. "Are you really so deluded that you think I would ever collaborate with you after this?"

"Mmm. It's more that you don't have a choice. Because if you want to finish your project, my lab is your only opportunity. And if you don't . . . well. You sent me information on all your protocols, which means that I can easily replicate them. But don't worry. Maybe I'll mention you in the acknowledgment section."

She felt the ground flip under her feet. "You wouldn't," she whispered. "It's research misconduct."

"Listen, Olive. My friendly advice is: suck it up. Keep Adam happy and interested as long as possible, and then come to my lab to finally do some decent work. If you keep *me* happy, I'll make sure you can save the world from pancreatic cancer. Your nice little sob story about your mom or your aunt or your stupid kindergarten teacher dying from it is only going to get you so far. You're mediocre."

Olive turned around and ran from the room.

WHEN SHE HEARD the beep of the key card, she immediately wiped her face with the sleeves of her dress. It didn't quite do the trick: she'd been crying for a solid twenty minutes, and

even an entire paper towel roll wouldn't have been enough to hide what she'd been up to. Really, though, it wasn't Olive's fault. She'd been sure Adam had to attend the opening ceremony, or at least the department social after his talk. Wasn't he on the social-and-networking committee? He should have been elsewhere. Socializing. Networking. Committeeing.

But here he was. Olive heard steps as he walked inside, then him stopping at the entrance of the bedroom, and . . .

She couldn't convince her eyes to meet his. She was a mess after all, a miserable, disastrous mess. But she should at least attempt to divert Adam's attention. Maybe by saying something. Anything.

"Hey." She tried a smile, but continued to stare down at her own hands. "How did your address go?"

"What happened?" His voice was calm, pitched low.

"Did you only just finish?" Her smile was holding. Good. Good, that was good. "How was the Q and A—"

"What happened?"

"Nothing. I . . ."

She didn't manage to finish the sentence. And the smile—which, if she was honest with herself, hadn't been much of a smile to begin with—was crumbling. Olive heard Adam come closer but didn't look at him. Her closed eyelids were all that was keeping the floodgates shut, and they weren't doing a good job of it, either.

She startled when she found him kneeling in front of her. Right by her chair, his head level with hers, studying her with a worried frown. She made to hide her face in her palms, but his hand came up to her chin and lifted it up, until she had no choice but to meet his eyes. Then his fingers slid up to her cheek, cupping it as he asked, yet again, "Olive. What happened?"

“Nothing.” Her voice shook. It kept disappearing somewhere, melting in the tears.

“Olive.”

“Really. Nothing.”

Adam stared at her, questioning, and didn’t let go. “Did someone buy the last bag of chips?”

A laugh bubbled out of her, wet and not wholly under her control. “Yes. Was it you?”

“Of course.” His thumb swiped across her cheekbone, stopping a falling tear. “I bought all of them.”

This smile felt better than the one she’d cobbled together earlier. “I hope you have good health insurance, because you’re so getting type 2 diabetes.”

“Worth it.”

“You monster.” She must have been leaning into his hand, because his thumb was stroking her again. Ever so gently.

“Is that how you talk to your fake boyfriend?” He looked so worried. His eyes, the line of his mouth. And yet—so patient. “What happened, Olive?”

She shook her head. “I just . . .”

She couldn’t tell him. And she couldn’t *not* tell him. But above all, she couldn’t tell him.

Who do you think Adam will believe, Olive?

She had to take a deep breath. Push Tom’s voice out of her head and calm herself before continuing. Come up with something to say, something that wouldn’t make the sky fall in this hotel room.

“My talk. I thought it went okay. My friends said it did. But then I heard people talking about it, and they said . . .” Adam

really should stop touching her. She must be getting his whole hand wet. The sleeve of his blazer, too.

"What did they say?"

"Nothing. That it was derivative. Boring. That I stammered. They knew that I'm your girlfriend and said that was the only reason I was chosen to give a talk." She shook her head. She needed to let it go. To put it out of her head. To think carefully about what to do.

"Who? Who were they?"

Oh, Adam. "Someone. I'm not sure."

"Did you see their badges?"

"I . . . didn't pay attention."

"Were they on your panel?" There was something underneath his tone. Something pressing that hinted at violence and rage and broken bones. Adam's hand was still gentle on her cheek, but his eyes narrowed. There was a new tension in his jaw, and Olive felt a shiver run down her spine.

"No," she lied. "It doesn't matter. It's okay."

His lips pressed into a straight line, his nostrils flared, so she added, "I don't care what people think of me, anyway."

"Right," he scoffed.

This Adam, right here, was the moody, irascible Adam who grads in her program complained about. Olive shouldn't have been surprised to see him this angry, but he'd never been like this with her before.

"No, really, I don't care what people say—"

"I know you don't. But that's the problem, isn't it?" He stared at her, and he was so close. She could see how the yellows and greens mixed into the clear brown of his eyes.

“It’s not what *they* say. It’s what *you* think. It’s that you think they’re right. Don’t you?”

Her mouth was full of cotton. “I . . .”

“Olive. You are a great scientist. And you will become an even better one.” The way he was looking at her, so earnest and serious—it was going to break her. “Whatever this asshole said, it speaks nothing of you and a whole lot of them.” His fingers shifted on her skin to weave through the hair behind her ear. “Your work is brilliant.”

She didn’t even think it through. And even if she had, she probably couldn’t have stopped herself. She just leaned forward and hid her face in his neck, hugging him tight. A terrible idea, stupid and inappropriate, and Adam was surely going to push her away, any minute now, except that . . .

His palm slid to her nape, almost as if to press her into him, and Olive just stayed there for long minutes, crying warm tears into the flesh of his throat, feeling how grounding, how warm, how solid he was—under her fingers and in her life.

You just had to go and make me fall for you, she thought, blinking against his skin. *You absolute ass.*

He didn’t let her go. Not until she pulled back and wiped her cheeks again, feeling like maybe this time around she’d be able to hold it together. She sniffled, and he leaned over to grab a box of tissues from the TV table. “I really am fine.”

He sighed.

“Okay, maybe . . . maybe I’m not fine right now, but I will be.” She accepted the tissue that he plucked for her and blew her nose. “I just need a while to . . .”

He studied her and nodded, his eyes unreadable again.

“Thank you. For what you said. For letting me snot all over your hotel room.”

He smiled. “Anytime.”

“And your jacket, too. Are you . . . Are you going to the department social?” she asked, dreading the moment she would have to get out of this chair. Of this room. *Be honest*, that sensible, ever-knowing voice inside her whispered. *It’s his presence that you don’t want to be out of.*

“Are you?”

She shrugged. “I said I would. But I don’t feel like talking to anyone right now.” She dried her cheeks once more, but miraculously the flow had stopped. Adam Carlsen, responsible for 90 percent of the department’s tears, had actually managed to make someone stop crying. Who would’ve thought? “Though I feel like the free alcohol could really help.”

He stared at her pensively for a moment, biting the inside of his cheek. Then he nodded, seeming to reach some sort of decision, and stood with his hand held out to her. “Come on.”

“Oh.” She had to crane her neck to look up at him. “I think I’m going to wait a bit before I—”

“We’re not going to the social.”

We? “What?”

“Come on,” he repeated, and this time Olive took his hand and didn’t let go. She couldn’t, with the way his fingers were closing around hers. Adam looked pointedly at her shoes, until she got the hint and slipped them on, using his arm to keep her balance.

“Where are we going?”

“To get some free alcohol. Well”—he amended—“free for you.”

She almost gasped when she realized what he meant. “No, I—Adam, no. You have to go to the department social. And to the opening ceremony. You’re the keynote speaker!”

“And I keynote-spoke.” He grabbed her red duffle coat from the bed and pulled her toward the entrance. “Can you walk in those shoes?”

“I—yes, but—”

“I have my key card; we don’t need yours.”

“Adam.” She grabbed his wrist, and he immediately turned to look at her. “Adam, you can’t skip those events. People will say that you—”

His smile was lopsided. “That I want to spend time with my girlfriend?”

Olive’s brain stopped. Just like that. And then it started again, and—

The world was a little different.

When he tugged her hand again, she smiled and simply followed him out of the room.

Chapter Fifteen

HYPOTHESIS: *There is no moment in life that cannot be improved by food delivered by conveyor belt.*

Everyone saw them.

People whom Olive had never met before, people whom she recognized from blog posts and science Twitter, people from her department who'd been her teachers in previous years. People who smiled at Adam, who addressed him by his first name or as Dr. Carlsen, who told him "Great talk" or "See you around." People who completely ignored Olive, and people who studied her curiously—her, and Adam, and the place where their hands were joined.

Adam mostly nodded back, only stopping to chat with Holden.

"You guys skipping the boring shit?" he asked with a knowing smile.

"Yep."

"I'll make sure to drink your booze, then. And to extend your apologies."

"No need."

"I'll just say you had a family emergency." Holden winked. "Perhaps *future-family* emergency, how does that sound?"

Adam rolled his eyes and pulled Olive outside. She had to hurry to keep up with him, not because he was walking particularly fast, but because his legs were so long, one of his strides was worth about three of hers.

“Um . . . I’m wearing heels, here.”

He turned to her, his eyes traveling down her legs and then rapidly moving away. “I know. You’re less vertically challenged than usual.”

Her eyes narrowed. “Hey, I’m five-eight. That’s actually pretty tall.”

“Hm.” Adam’s expression was noncommittal.

“What’s that face?”

“What face?”

“Your face.”

“Just my regular face?”

“No, that’s your ‘you’re not tall’ face.”

He smiled, just a smidge. “Are the shoes okay for walking? Should we go back?”

“They’re fine, but can we slow down?”

He feigned a sigh, but he did. His hand let go of hers and pushed against her lower back to steer her to the right. She had to hide a small shiver.

“So . . .” She stuffed her fists in the pockets of her coat, trying to ignore how the tips of her fingers were still tingling. “Those free drinks you mentioned? Do they come with food?”

“I’ll get you dinner.” Adam’s lips curved a little more. “You’re not a cheap date, though.”

She leaned into his side and bumped her shoulder against his biceps. It was hard not to notice that there was no give. “I really am not. I fully plan to eat and drink my feelings.”

His smile was more uneven than ever. “Where do you want to go, smart-ass?”

“Let’s see . . . What do you like? Aside from tap water and hard-boiled spinach?”

He gave her a dirty side-look. “How about burgers?”

“Meh.” She shrugged. “I guess. If there’s nothing else.”

“What’s wrong with burgers?”

“I don’t know. They taste like foot.”

“They what?”

“What about Mexican? Do you like Mexican?”

“Burgers don’t taste like—”

“Or Italian? Pizza would be great. And maybe there’s something celery-based that you could order.”

“Burgers it is.”

Olive laughed. “What about Chinese?”

“Had it for lunch.”

“Well, people in China have Chinese food multiple times a day, so you shouldn’t let that stop you from— *Oh*.”

It took Adam two whole steps to realize that Olive had stopped in the middle of the sidewalk. He whirled around to look at her. “What?”

“There.” She pointed to the red-and-white sign across the road.

Adam’s gaze followed, and for a long moment he simply stared, blinking several times. And then: “No.”

“There,” she repeated, feeling her cheeks widen into a grin.

“Olive.” There was a deep vertical line between his eyebrows. “No. There are way better restaurants we can—”

“But I want to go to that one.”

“Why? There’s—”

She moved closer to him and grasped the sleeve of his blazer. “Please. Please?”

Adam pinched his nose, sighed, and pursed his lips. But not five seconds later he put his hand between her shoulder blades to guide her across the street.

THE PROBLEM, HE explained in hushed tones as they waited to be seated, was not the sushi train, but the all-you-can-eat for twenty dollars.

“It’s never a good sign,” he told her, but his voice sounded more resigned than combative, and when the server ushered them inside, he followed her meekly to the booth. Olive marveled at the plates traveling on the conveyor belt weaving across the restaurant, unable to stop her openmouthed grin. When she remembered Adam’s presence and turned her attention back to him, he was staring at her with an expression halfway between exasperated and indulgent.

“You know,” he told her, eyeing a seaweed salad passing by his shoulder, “we could go to a real Japanese restaurant. I am very happy to pay for however much sushi you want to eat.”

“But will it *move* around me?”

He shook his head. “I take it back: you are a *disturbingly* cheap date.”

She ignored him and lifted the glass door, grabbing a roll and a chocolate doughnut. Adam muttered something that sounded a lot like “very authentic,” and when the waitress stopped by he ordered them both a beer.

“What do you think this is?” Olive dipped a piece of sushi in her soy sauce. “Tuna or salmon?”

“Probably spider meat.”

She popped it into her mouth. “Delicious.”

“Really.” He looked skeptical.

It wasn’t, in all truth. But it was okay. And this, well, this was so much fun. Exactly what she needed to empty her mind of . . . everything. Everything but here and now. With Adam.

“Yep.” She pushed the remaining piece toward him, silently daring him to try it.

He broke apart his chopsticks with a long-suffering expression and picked it up, chewing for a long time.

“It tastes like foot.”

“No way. Here.” She grabbed a bowl of edamame from the belt. “You can have this. It’s basically broccoli.”

He brought one to his mouth, managing to look like he didn’t hate it. “We don’t have to talk, by the way.”

Olive tilted her head.

“You said you didn’t want to talk to anyone back at the hotel. So we don’t have to, if you’d rather eat this”—he glanced at the plates she had accumulated with obvious distrust—“food in silence.”

You’re not just anyone, seemed like a dangerous thing to say, so she smiled. “I bet you’re great at silences.”

“Is that a dare?”

She shook her head. “I want to talk. Just, can we not talk about the conference? Or science? Or the fact that the world is full of assholes?” *And that some of them are your close friends and collaborators?*

His hand closed into a fist on the table, jaw clenched tight as he nodded.

“Awesome. We could chat about how nice this place is—”

“It’s appalling.”

“—or the taste of the sushi—”

“Foot.”

“—or the best movie in the Fast and Furious franchise—”

“*Fast Five*. Though I have a feeling you’re going to say—”

“*Tokyo Drift*.”

“Right.” He sighed, and they exchanged a small smile. And then, then the smile faded and they just stared at each other, something thick and sweet coloring the air between them, magnetic and just the right side of bearable. Olive had to rip her gaze from his, because—no. No.

She turned away, and her eyes fell on a couple at a table a few feet to their right. They were the mirror image of Adam and Olive, sitting on each side of their booth, all warm glances and tentative smiles. “Do you think they’re on a fake date?” she asked, leaning back against her seat.

Adam followed her gaze to the couple. “I thought those mostly involved coffee shops and sunscreen applications?”

“Nah. Only the best ones.”

He laughed silently. “Well.” He focused on the table, and on angling his chopsticks so that they were parallel to each other. “I can definitely recommend it.”

Olive dipped her chin to hide a smile and then leaned forward to steal one edamame.

IN THE ELEVATOR she held on to his biceps and took off her heels, failing disastrously at being graceful as he studied her

and shook his head. “I thought you said they didn’t hurt?” He sounded curious. Amused? Fond?

“That was ages ago.” Olive picked them up and let them dangle from her fingers. When she straightened, Adam was again impossibly tall. “Now I am very ready to chop off my feet.”

The elevator pinged, and the doors opened. “That seems counterproductive.”

“Oh, you have no idea— Hey, what are you—?”

Her heart skipped what felt like a dozen beats when Adam swept her up into a full bridal carry. She yelped, and he carried her to their room, all because she had a blister on her pinkie toe. Without much of a choice, she closed her arms around his neck and sank against him, trying to make sure she’d survive if he decided to drop her. His hands were warm around her back and knee, forearms tight and strong.

He smelled amazing. He felt even better.

“You know, the room’s only twenty meters away—”

“I have no idea what that means.”

“Adam.”

“We Americans think in feet, Canada.”

“I’m too heavy.”

“You really are.” The ease with which he shifted her in his arms to slide the key card belied his words. “You should cut pumpkin-flavored drinks from your diet.”

She pulled his hair and smiled into his shoulder. “Never.”

Their name tags were still on the TV table, exactly where they’d left them, and there was a conference program half-open on Adam’s bed, not to mention tote bags and a mountain of useless flyers. Olive noticed them immediately, and it was

like having a thousand little splinters pressed deep into a fresh wound. It brought back every single word Tom had said to her, all his lies and his truths and his mocking insults, and . . .

Adam must have known. As soon as he put her down, he gathered everything that was conference related and stuck it on a chair facing the windows, where it was hidden from their sight, and Olive . . . She could have hugged him. She wasn't going to—she already had, twice today—but she really could have. Instead she resolutely pushed all those little splinters out of her mind, plopped herself down on her bed belly up, and stared at the ceiling.

She'd thought it would be awkward, being with him in such a small space for a whole night. And it was a little bit, or at least it had been when she'd first arrived earlier today, but now she felt calm and safe. Like her world, constantly hectic and messy and demanding, was slowing down. Easing up, just a bit.

The bedcover rustled under her head when she turned to look at Adam. He seemed relaxed, too, as he draped his jacket against the back of a chair, then took off his watch and set it neatly on the desk. The casual domesticity of it—the thought that his day and hers would end in the same place, at the same time—soothed her like a slow caress down her spine.

"Thank you. For buying me food."

He glanced at her, crinkling his nose. "I don't know that there was any food involved."

She smiled, rolling to her side. "You're not going out again?"

"Out?"

"Yeah. To meet other very important science people? Eat another seven pounds of edamame?"

“I think I’ve had enough networking and edamame for this decade.” He took off his shoes and socks, and set them neatly by the bed.

“You’re staying in, then?”

He paused and looked at her. “Unless you’d rather be alone?”

No, I would not. She propped herself up on her elbow. “Let’s watch a movie.”

Adam blinked at her. “Sure.” He sounded surprised but not displeased. “But if your taste in movies is anything like your taste in restaurants, it’ll probably—”

He didn’t see the pillow coming at him. It bounced off his face and then fell to the floor, making Olive giggle and spring off the bed. “You mind if I shower, before?”

“You smart-ass.”

She started rummaging through her suitcase. “You can pick the movie! I don’t care which one, as long as there are no scenes in which horses are killed, because it— Crap.”

“What?”

“I forgot my pajamas.” She looked for her phone in the pockets of her coat. It wasn’t there, and she realized that she hadn’t brought it with her to the restaurant. “Have you seen my— Oh, there it is.”

The battery was almost dead, probably because she had forgotten to turn off the recording after her talk. She hadn’t checked her messages in a few hours, and found several unread texts—mostly from Anh and Malcolm, asking her where she was and if she still planned to come to the social, telling her to get her ass there ASAP because “the booze is flowing like a river,” and then, finally, just informing her that they were all going downtown to a bar. Anh must have been

well on her way to wasted by that point, because her last message read: Clallif u want tp join ♥ us, Olvie

"I forgot my pajamas and wanted to see if I could borrow something from my friends, but I don't think they'll be back for hours. Though maybe Jess didn't go with them, let me text and see if—"

"Here." Adam set something black and neatly folded on her bed. "You can use this if you want."

She studied it skeptically. "What is it?"

"A T-shirt. I slept in it yesterday, but it's probably better than the dress you're wearing. To sleep in, I mean," he added, a faint flush on his cheeks.

"Oh." She picked it up, and the T-shirt unfolded. She immediately noticed three things: it was large, so large that it would hit her mid-thigh or even lower; it smelled heavenly, a mix of Adam's skin and laundry detergent that had her wanting to bury her face in it and inhale for weeks; and on the front, it said in big, white letters . . .

" 'Biology Ninja'?"

Adam scratched the back of his neck. "I didn't buy it."

"Did you . . . steal it?"

"It was a present."

"Well." She grinned. "This is one hell of a present. Doctor ninja."

He stared at her flatly. "If you tell anyone, I'll deny it."

She chuckled. "Are you sure it's okay? What will you wear?"

"Nothing."

She must have been gaping at him a little too much, because he gave her an amused look and shook his head.

“I’m kidding. I have a tee under my shirt.”

She nodded and hurried into the bathroom, making a point not to meet his eyes.

Alone under the hot jet of the shower it was much harder to concentrate on stale sushi and Adam’s uneven smile, and to forget why he’d ended up allowing her to cling to him for three whole hours. What Tom had done to her today was despicable, and she was going to have to report him. She was going to have to tell Adam. She was going to have to *do* something. But every time she tried to think about it rationally, she could hear his voice in her head—*mediocre* and *nice legs* and *useless and derivative* and *little sob story*—so loud that she was afraid her skull would shatter into pieces.

So she kept her shower as quick as possible, distracting herself by reading the labels of Adam’s shampoo and body wash (something hypoallergenic and pH-balanced that had her rolling her eyes) and drying herself as fast as humanly possible. She took out her contacts, then stole a bit of his toothpaste. Her gaze fell on his toothbrush; it was charcoal black, down to the bristles, and she couldn’t help but giggle.

When she stepped out of the bathroom, he was sitting on the edge of the bed, wearing plaid pajama pants and a white T-shirt. He was holding the TV remote in one hand and his phone in the other, looking between the two screens with a frown.

“You would.”

“Would what?” he asked absentmindedly.

“Have a black toothbrush.”

His mouth twitched. “You will be shocked to hear that there is no Netflix category for movies in which horses don’t die.”

“An obscenity, isn’t it? It’s much needed.” She crumpled her too-short dress into a ball and stuffed it inside her bag, fantasizing that she was stuffing Tom’s throat. “If I were American, I’d totally run for Congress on that platform.”

“Should we fake-marry, so you can get citizenship?”

Her heart stumbled. “Oh, yes. I think it’s time we fake-move-to-the-next-level.”

“So”—he tapped at his phone—“I’m just googling ‘dead horse,’ plus the title of whatever movie sounds good.”

“That’s what I usually do.” She padded across the room until she was standing next to him. “What do you have?”

“This one’s about a linguistics professor who’s asked to help decipher an alien—”

He glanced up from his phone, and immediately fell silent. His mouth opened and then shut, and his eyes skittered to her thighs, her feet, her unicorn knee socks, and quickly back to her face. No, not her face: some point above her shoulder. He cleared his throat before saying, “Glad it . . . fits.” He was looking at his phone again. His grip on the remote had tightened.

It was a long beat before she realized that he was referring to his T-shirt. “Oh, yeah.” She grinned. “Exactly my size, right?” It was so large that it covered pretty much the same amount of skin her dress had, but was soft and comfortable like an old shoe. “Maybe I won’t give it back.”

“It’s all yours.”

She rocked on her heels, and wondered if it would be okay if she sat next to him now. It was only convenient, since they had to choose a movie together. “Can I really sleep in it this week?”

“Of course. I’ll be gone tomorrow, anyway.”

“Oh.” She knew that, of course. She’d known the first time he’d told her, a couple of weeks ago; she’d known this morning when she’d boarded the plane in San Francisco, and she’d known mere hours ago, when she’d used that precise piece of information to comfort herself that no matter how awkward and stressful, her stay with Adam would at least be short-lived. Except that it wasn’t awkward now. And it wasn’t stressful. Not nearly as much as the idea of being apart from him for several days. Of being here, of all places, without him. “How big is your suitcase?”

“Hm?”

“Can I come with you?”

He looked up at her, still smiling, but he must’ve noticed something in her eyes, behind the joke and the attempt at humor. Something vulnerable and imploring that she’d failed to adequately bury within herself.

“Olive.” He dropped his phone and the remote on the bed. “Don’t let them.”

She just tilted her head. She was not going to cry again. There was no point in it. And she was not like this—this fragile, defenseless creature who second-guessed herself at every turn. At least, she didn’t use to be. God, she hated Tom Benton.

“Let them?”

“Don’t let them ruin this conference for you. Or science. Or make you feel any less proud of your accomplishments.”

She looked down, studying the yellow of her socks as she buried her toes in the soft carpet. And then up to him again.

“You know what’s really sad about this?”

He shook his head, and Olive continued.

“For a moment there, during the talk . . . I really enjoyed myself. I was panicky. Close to puking, for sure. But while I was talking to this huge group of people about my work and my hypotheses and my ideas, and explaining my reasoning and the trials and errors and why what I research is so important, I . . . I felt confident. I felt good at it. It all felt *right* and *fun*. Like science is supposed to be when you share it.” She wrapped her arms around herself. “Like maybe I could be an academic, down the road. A real one. And maybe make a difference.”

He nodded as though he knew exactly what she meant. “I wish I had been there, Olive.”

She could tell he really did. That he regretted not being with her. But even Adam—indomitable, decisive, ever-competent Adam—couldn’t be in two places at once, and the fact remained that he had *not* seen her talk.

I have no idea if you’re good enough, but that’s not what you should be asking yourself. What matters is whether your reason *to be in academia is good enough.* That’s what he’d told her years ago in the bathroom. What she’d been repeating to herself for years whenever she’d hit a wall. But what if he’d been wrong all along? What if there *was* such a thing as good enough? What if that was what mattered the most?

“What if it’s true? What if I really am mediocre?”

He didn’t reply for a long moment. He just stared, a hint of frustration in his expression, a thoughtful line to his lips. And then, low and even, he said, “When I was in my second year of grad school, my adviser told me that I was a failure who would never amount to anything.”

“What?” Whatever she’d expected, that wasn’t it. “Why?”

“Because of an incorrect primer design. But it wasn’t the first time, nor the last. And it wasn’t the most trivial reason he used to berate me. Sometimes he’d publicly humiliate his

grads for no reason. But that specific time stuck with me, because I remember thinking . . .” He swallowed, and his throat worked. “I remember being sure that he was right. That I would never amount to anything.”

“But you . . .” *Have published articles in the* Lancet. *Have tenure and millions of dollars in research grants. Were keynote speaker at a major conference.* Olive wasn’t even sure what to bring up, so she settled for, “You were a MacArthur Fellow.”

“I was.” He exhaled a laugh. “And five years before the MacArthur grant, in the second year of my Ph.D., I spent an entire week preparing law school applications because I was sure that I’d never become a scientist.”

“Wait—so what Holden said was true?” She couldn’t quite believe it. “Why law school?”

He shrugged. “My parents would have loved it. And if I couldn’t be a scientist, I didn’t care what I’d become.”

“What stopped you, then?”

He sighed. “Holden. And Tom.”

“Tom,” she repeated. Her stomach twisted, leaden.

“I would have dropped out of my Ph.D. program if it hadn’t been for them. Our adviser was well-known in the field for being a sadist. Like I am, I suppose.” His mouth curled into a bitter smile. “I was aware of his reputation before starting my Ph.D. Thing is, he was also brilliant. The very best. And I thought . . . I thought that I could take it, whatever he’d dish out at me, and that it would be worth it. I thought it would be a matter of sacrifice and discipline and hard work.” There was a strain to Adam’s voice, as though the topic was not one he was used to discussing.

Olive tried to be gentle when she asked, “And it wasn’t?”

He shook his head. “The opposite, in a way.”

“The opposite of discipline and hard work?”

“We worked hard, all right. But discipline . . . discipline would presume specifically laid-out expectations. Ideal codes of behavior are defined, and a failure to adhere to them is addressed in a productive way. That’s what I thought, at least. What I still think. You said that I’m brutal with my grads, and maybe you’re right—”

“Adam, I—”

“But what I try to do is set goals for them and help them achieve them. If I realize that they’re not doing what we have mutually agreed needs to be done, I tell them what’s wrong and what they must change. I don’t baby them, I don’t hide criticism in praises, I don’t believe in that Oreo cookie feedback crap, and if they find me terrifying or antagonizing because of it, so be it.” He took a deep breath. “But I also don’t *ever* make it about them. It’s always about the work. Sometimes it’s well done, other times it’s not, and if it’s not . . . work can be redone. It can improve. I don’t want them to tie their self-worth to what they produce.” He paused, and he looked—no, he *felt* faraway. Like these were things he gave a great deal of thought to, like he wanted this for his students. “I hate how self-important this all sounds, but science *is* serious business, and . . . it’s my duty as a scientist, I believe.”

“I . . .” All of a sudden, the air in the hotel room was cold. *I’m the one who told him*, she thought, feeling her stomach flip. *I’m the one who told him repeatedly that he’s terrifying and antagonizing, and that all his students hate him.* “And your adviser didn’t?”

“I never quite understood what he thought. What I do know now, years later, is that he was abusive. A lot of terrible things happened under his watch—scientists were not given credit for their ideas or authorship of papers they deserved. People were publicly belittled for making mistakes that would be normal

for experienced researchers—let alone trainees. Expectations were stellar, but never fully defined. Impossible deadlines were set arbitrarily, out of the blue, and grads were punished for not meeting them. Ph.D. students were constantly assigned to the same tasks, then pitted against each other and asked to compete, for my adviser's amusement. Once he put Holden and me on the same research project and told us that whoever obtained publishable results first would receive funding for the following semester."

She tried to imagine how it would feel, if Dr. Aslan openly promoted a competitive environment between Olive and her cohorts. But no—Adam and Holden had been close friends their whole lives, so the situation wasn't comparable. It would have been like being told that to receive a salary next semester, Olive would need to outscience Anh. "What did you do?"

He ran a hand through his hair, and a strand fell on his forehead. "We paired up. We figured that we had complementary skills—a pharmacology expert can achieve more with the help of a computational biologist, and vice versa. And we were right. We ran a really good study. It was exhausting, but also elating, staying up all hours to figure out how to fix our protocols. Knowing that we were the first to discover something." For a moment, he seemed to enjoy the memory. But then he pressed his lips together, rolling his jaw. "And at the end of the semester, when we presented our findings to our adviser, he told us that we'd both be without funding, because by collaborating we hadn't followed his guidelines. We spent the following spring teaching six sections of Introduction to Biology per week—on top of lab work. Holden and I were living together. I swear that I once heard him mumble 'mitochondria are the powerhouse of the cell' in his sleep."

"But . . . you gave your adviser what he wanted."

Adam shook his head. “He wanted a power play. And in the end he got it: he punished us for not dancing to his tune and published the findings we brought to him without acknowledging our role in obtaining them.”

“I . . .” Her fingers fisted in the loose fabric of her borrowed T-shirt. “Adam, I’m so sorry I ever compared you to him. I didn’t mean to—”

“It’s okay.” He smiled at her, tight but reassuring.

It was *not* okay. Yes, Adam could be direct, painfully so. Stubborn and blunt and uncompromising. Not always kind, but never devious, or malicious. Quite the opposite: he was honest to a fault, and required from others the same discipline he clearly imposed on himself. As much as his grads complained about his harsh feedback or the long hours of work they were asked to put in the lab, they all recognized that he was a hands-on mentor without being a micromanager. Most of them graduated with several publications and moved on to excellent academic jobs.

“You didn’t know.”

“Still, I . . .” She bit her lip, feeling guilty. Feeling defeated. Feeling angry at Adam’s adviser and at Tom for treating academia like their own personal playground. At herself, for not knowing what to do about it. “Why did no one report him?”

He closed his eyes briefly. “Because he was short-listed for a Nobel Prize. Twice. Because he had powerful friends in high places, and we thought no one would believe us. Because he could make or break careers. Because we felt that there was no real system in place to ask for help.” There was a sour set to his jaw, and he was not looking at her anymore. It was so surreal, the idea of Adam Carlsen feeling powerless. And yet, his eyes told another story. “We were terrified, and probably somewhere deep down we were convinced that we’d signed up

for it and we deserved it. That we were failures who would never amount to anything."

Her heart hurt for him. For herself. "I'm so, *so* sorry."

He shook his head again, and his expression somewhat cleared. "When he told me that I was a failure, I thought he was right. I was ready to give up on the one thing I cared about because of it. And Tom and Holden—they had their own issues with our adviser, of course. Everyone did. But they helped me. For some reason my adviser always seemed to know when something wrong was happening with my studies, but Tom mediated a lot between us. He took lots of crap so I wouldn't have to. He was a favorite of my adviser's and interceded to make the lab less like a battle zone."

Adam talking about Tom as though he were a hero made her nauseous, but she remained silent. This wasn't about her.

"And Holden . . . Holden stole my law school applications and made paper planes out of them. He was removed enough from what was happening to me that he could help me see things objectively. Just like I am removed from what happened to you today." His eyes were on her, now. There was a light in them that she didn't understand. "You are not mediocre, Olive. You were not invited to speak because people think that you are my girlfriend—there is no such thing, since SBD's abstracts go through a blind review process. I would know, because I've been roped into reviewing them in the past. And the work you presented is important, rigorous, and brilliant." He took a deep breath. His shoulders rose and fell in time with the thudding of her heart. "I wish you could see yourself the way I see you."

Maybe it was the words, or maybe the tone. Maybe it was the way he'd just told her something about himself, or how he'd taken her hand earlier and saved her from her misery. Her knight in black armor. Maybe it was none of it, maybe it was

all of it, maybe it was always going to happen. Still—it didn't matter. Suddenly, it just didn't matter, the *why* of it, the *how*. The *after*. All Olive cared about was that she wanted to, right now, and that seemed enough to make it all right.

It was all so slow: the step forward she took to come to stand between his knees, the rise of her hand to his face, the way her fingers cupped his jaw. Slow enough that he could have stopped her, he could have pulled out of reach, he could have said something—and he did not. He simply looked up at her, his eyes a clear, liquid brown, and Olive's heart at once jumped and quieted when he tilted his head and leaned into her palm.

It didn't surprise her, how soft his skin was beneath the night stubble, how much warmer than hers. And when she bent, for once taller than him, the shape of his lips under hers was like an old song, familiar and easy. It wasn't their first kiss, after all. Though, it was different. Calm and tentative and precious, Adam's hand light on her waist as he tilted his chin up to her, eager and pressing, like this was something he'd thought of—like he'd been wanting it, too. It wasn't their first kiss, but it was the first kiss that was *theirs*, and Olive savored it for long moments. The texture, the smell, the closeness. The slight hitch in Adam's breath, the odd pauses, the way their lips had to work a little before finding the right angles and some form of coordination.

See? She wanted to say, triumphant. To whom, she wasn't sure. *See? It was always going to be like this*. Olive grinned into his lips. And Adam—

Adam was already shaking his head when she pulled back, like a *no* had been waiting in his mouth all along, even as he returned her kiss. His fingers closed tight around her wrist, drawing her hand away from his face. "This is not a good idea."

Her smile faded. He was right. He was completely right. He was also wrong. “Why?”

“Olive.” He shook his head again. Then his hand left her waist and came up to his lips, as if to touch the kiss they’d just shared, make sure it had really happened. “This is . . . no.”

He really was right. But . . . “Why?” she repeated.

Adam’s fingers pressed into his eyes. His left hand was still holding her wrist, and she wondered distractedly if he was even aware of it. If he knew that his thumb was swiping back and forth across her pulse. “This is not what we’re here for.”

She could feel her nostrils flare. “That doesn’t mean that —”

“You’re not thinking clearly.” He swallowed visibly. “You’re upset and drunk, and—”

“I had two beers. Hours ago.”

“You’re a grad student, currently depending on me for a place to stay, and even if not, the power I have over you could easily turn this into a coercive dynamic that—”

“I’m—” Olive laughed. “I’m not feeling coerced, I—”

“You’re in love with *someone else*!”

She almost recoiled. The way he spit out the words was that heated. It should have put her off, driven her away, once and for all drilled into her head how ridiculous this was, how disastrous an idea. It didn’t, though. By now the moody, ill-tempered ass Adam meshed so well with *her* Adam, the one who bought her cookies and checked her slides and let her cry into his neck. There might have been a time when she couldn’t quite reconcile the two, but they were all so clear now, the many faces of him. She wouldn’t want to leave behind any of them. Not one.

“Olive.” He sighed heavily, closing his eyes. The idea that he might be thinking of the woman who Holden mentioned flashed into her mind and slipped away, too painful to entertain.

She should just tell him. She should be honest with him, admit that she didn’t care about Jeremy, that there was no one else. Never had been. But she was terrified, paralyzed with fear, and after the day she’d had, her heart felt so easy to break. So fragile. Adam could shatter it in a thousand pieces, and still be none the wiser.

“Olive, this is how you’re feeling *now*. A month from now, a week, tomorrow, I don’t want you to regret—”

“What about what *I* want?” She leaned forward, letting her words soak the silence for drawn-out seconds. “What about the fact that *I* want this? Though maybe you don’t care.” She squared her shoulders, blinking quickly against the prickling sensation in her eyes. “Because you don’t want it, right? Maybe I’m just not attractive to you and *you* don’t want this —”

It nearly made her lose her balance, the way he tugged at her wrist and pulled her hand to himself, pressing her palm flush to his groin to show her that . . . Oh.

Oh.

Yeah.

His jaw rolled as he held her gaze. “You have no fucking idea what I want.”

It took her breath away, all of it. The low, guttural tone of his voice, the thick ridge under her fingers, the enraged, hungry note in his eyes. He pushed her hand away almost immediately, but it already felt too late.

It wasn’t that Olive hadn’t . . . the kisses they’d exchanged, they were always physical, but now it was as if something had

been switched on. For a long time she'd thought Adam handsome and attractive. She'd touched him, sat on his lap, considered the vague possibility of being intimate with him. She'd thought about him, about sex, about him *and* sex, but it had always been abstract. Hazy and undefined. Like line art in black and white: just the base for a drawing that was suddenly coloring on the inside.

It was clear now, in the damp ache pooling between her thighs, in his eyes that were all pupil, how it would be between them. Heady and sweaty and slick. Challenging. They would do things for each other, demand things of each other. They would be incredibly close. And Olive—now that she could see it, she really, *really* wanted it.

She stepped close, even closer. "Well, then." Her voice was low, but she knew he could hear her.

He shut his eyes tight. "This is not why I asked you to room with me."

"I know." Olive pushed a black strand of hair away from his forehead. "It's also not why I accepted."

His lips were parted, and he was staring down at her hand, the one that was almost wrapped around his erection a moment ago. "You said no sex."

She had said that. She remembered thinking about her rules, listing them in his office, and she remembered being certain that she would never, ever be interested in seeing Adam Carlsen for longer than ten minutes a week. "I also said it was going to be an on-campus thing. And we just went out for dinner. So." He might know what was best, but what he wanted was different. She could almost see the debris of his control, feel it slowly erode.

"I don't . . ." He straightened, infinitesimally. The line of his shoulders, his jaw—he was so tense, still avoiding her eyes. "I don't have anything."

It was a little embarrassing, the amount of time it took for her to parse the meaning of it. “Oh. It doesn’t matter. I’m on birth control. And clean.” She bit into her lip. “But we could also do . . . other things.”

Adam swallowed, twice, and then nodded. He wasn’t breathing normally. And Olive doubted he could say no at this point. That he would even want to. He did put up a good effort, though. “What if you hate me for this, after? What if we go back and you change your mind—”

“I won’t. I . . .” She stepped—God, even *closer*. She wouldn’t think about after. Couldn’t, didn’t want to. “I’ve never been surer of anything. Except maybe cell theory.” She smiled, hoping he’d smile back.

Adam’s mouth remained straight and serious, but it scarcely mattered: the next time Olive felt his touch it was on the slope of her hip bone, under the cotton of the T-shirt he’d given her.

Chapter Sixteen

HYPOTHESIS: *Despite what everyone says, sex is never going to be anything more than a mildly enjoyable activi– Oh.*

Oh.

It was like a layer peeled away.

Adam yanked off the shirt he was wearing in one fluid movement, and it was as though the white cotton was only one of many things tossed in a corner of the room. Olive didn't have a name for what the other things were; all she knew was that a few seconds earlier he'd seemed reluctant, almost unwilling to touch her, and now he was . . . not.

He was running the show now. Wrapping his large hands around her waist, sliding his fingertips under the elastic of her green polka-dot panties, and kissing her.

He kisses, Olive thought, *like a man starved*. Like he'd been waiting all this time. Holding back. Like the possibility of the two of them doing this had occurred to him in the past, but he'd set it aside, stored it away in a deep, dark place where it had grown into something fearsome and out of control. Olive thought she knew how it would be—they'd kissed before, after all. Except, she realized now, that *she* had always been the one to kiss him.

Maybe she was being fanciful. What did she know about different types of kisses, anyway? Still, something in her belly thrummed and liquefied when his tongue licked against hers, when he bit a tender spot on her neck, when he made a guttural noise in the back of his throat as his fingers cupped

her ass through her panties. Under her shirt, his hand traveled up to her rib cage. Olive gasped and smiled into his mouth.

"You did that before."

He blinked at her, confused, pupils blown large and dark. "What?"

"The night I kissed you in the hallway. You did it that night, too."

"I did what?"

"You touched me. Here." Her hand slid to her ribs to cover his through the cotton.

He looked up at her through dark lashes, and began to lift a corner of her shirt, up her thighs and past her hip until it caught right under her breast. He leaned into her, pressing his lips against the lowest part of her ribs. Olive gasped. And gasped again when he bit her softly, and then licked across the same spot.

"Here?" he asked. She was growing light-headed. It could be how close he was, or the heat in the room. Or the fact that she was almost naked, standing in front of him in nothing but panties and socks. "Olive." His mouth traveled upward, less than an inch, teeth grazing against skin and bone. "Here?" She hadn't thought she could get this wet this quickly. Or at all. Then again, she hadn't really thought much about sex in the past few years.

"Pay attention, sweetheart." He sucked the underside of her breast. She had to hold on to his shoulders, or her knees would give out on her. "Here?"

"I . . ." It took a moment to focus, but she nodded. "Maybe. Yes, there. It was . . . it was a good kiss." Her eyes fluttered closed, and she didn't even fight it when he took the shirt completely off her. It was his, after all. And the way he was

studying her, it brooked no self-consciousness on her part. “Do you remember it?”

He was the distracted one now. Staring at her breasts like they were something spectacular, his lips parted and breath quick and shallow. “Remember what?”

“Our first kiss.”

He didn’t answer. Instead he looked up and down at her, eyes glazed, and said, “I want to keep you in this hotel room for a week.” His hand came up to cup her breast, not exactly gentle. Just this side of too forceful, and Olive felt herself clench around nothing. “For a year.”

He pushed his hand against her shoulder blades to make her arch toward him, and then closed his mouth against her breast, all teeth and tongue and wonderful, delicious suction. Olive whimpered against the back of her hand, because she hadn’t known, hadn’t thought that she’d be so sensitive, but her nipples were tight and raw and almost sore, and if he didn’t do something, she’d—

“You’re edible, Olive.”

His palm pressed against her spine, and Olive arched a little more. An offering of sorts. “That’s probably an insult,” she breathed out with a smile, “considering that you only like wheatgrass and broccoli— *Oh*.”

He could fit her entire breast in his mouth. All of it. He groaned in the back of his throat, and it was clear that he’d love to swallow her whole. Olive should touch him, too—she was the one who’d asked for this, and it followed that she should make sure that being with her was not a chore for him. Maybe put her hand back where he’d dragged it earlier and stroke? He could instruct her on how he liked it. Maybe this was a one-time thing and they were never going to talk about it again, but Olive couldn’t help herself—she just wanted him to like this. To like *her*.

“This okay?” She must have lingered too long inside her head, because he was looking up at her with a frown, his thumb swiping back and forth on her hip bone. “You’re tense.” His voice was strained. He was cupping his cock almost absentmindedly, stroking and gripping every once in a while—when his eyes fell on the hard points of her nipples, when she shivered, when she squirmed on her feet to rub her thighs together. “We don’t have to—”

“I want to. I said I did.”

His throat bobbed. “It doesn’t matter, what you said. You can always change your mind.”

“I won’t.” The way he was looking at her, Olive was sure he’d protest again. But he just rested his forehead on her sternum, his breath warm against the skin he’d just licked, and let his fingertips coast the elastic of her panties, dip under the thin cotton.

“I think *I*’ve changed my mind,” he murmured.

She stiffened. “I know I’m not doing anything, but if you tell me what you like, I can—”

“My favorite color must be green, after all.”

She exhaled when his thumb pressed between her legs, brushing against fabric that was already dark and wet. She exhaled in a rush until there was no air left, embarrassment washing over her at the thought that now he must know exactly how much she wanted this—and at the pleasure of his finger, large and blunt, running against her seam.

He definitely knew. Because he looked back up at her, glassy-eyed and breathing fast. “Damn,” he said, quiet. “Olive.”

“Do you . . .” Her mouth was as dry as the desert. “Do you want me to take them off?”

“No.” He shook his head. “Not yet.”

“But if we—”

He hooked his finger on the elastic and pushed the cotton to the side. She was glistening, swollen and plump to her own eyes, way too far ahead, considering that they’d barely done anything. Too eager. This was embarrassing. “I’m sorry.” There were two kinds of heat, the one curling tight at the bottom of her stomach, and the one rising to her cheeks. Olive could barely tell them apart. “I am . . .”

“Perfect.” He wasn’t really talking to her. More to himself, marveling at the way his fingertip sank so easily between her folds, parting them and gliding back and forth until Olive threw back her head and closed her eyes because the pleasure was streaming, stretching, thrumming through her and she couldn’t, couldn’t, *couldn’t*—

“You are so beautiful.” The words sounded hushed, ripped out of him. Like he wasn’t going to say them. “May I?”

It took her several heartbeats to realize that he was referring to his middle finger, to the way it was circling around her entrance and tapping at it. Applying a light pressure right against the rim. So wet already.

Olive moaned. “Yes. Anything,” she breathed out.

He licked her nipple, a silent thank-you, and pushed in. Or at least, he tried. Olive hissed and so did Adam, with a muted, hoarse “Fuck.”

He had big fingers—that must be why they didn’t fit. The first knuckle was just shy of too much, a pinching ache and the sensation of damp, uncomfortable fullness. She shifted on her heels, trying to adjust and make room, and then shifted some more, until he had to grip her hip with his other hand to keep her still. Olive held on to his shoulders, his skin sweat slicked and scorching hot under her palms. “Shh.”

His thumb grazed her, and she whimpered. “It’s okay. Relax.”

Impossible. Though, if Olive had to be honest, the way his finger was curving inside her—it was already getting better. Not so painful now, and maybe even wetter, and if he touched her *there* . . . Her head lolled back. She clutched his muscles with her nails.

“There? Is that a good spot?”

Olive wanted to tell him that no, it was too much, but before she could open her mouth, he did it again, until she couldn’t keep quiet anymore, all groans and whimpers and wet, obscene noises. Until he tried to get a little further inside, and she couldn’t help wincing.

“What is it?” His voice was his regular voice, but a million times raspier. “Does it hurt?”

“No— *Oh*.”

He looked up, all flushed pale skin against dark waves. “Why are you so tense, Olive? You’ve done this before, right?”

“I—yes.” She was not sure what compelled her to continue. Any idiot could see from a mile away that it was a terrible idea, but there was no room left for lies now that they were standing so close. So she confessed, “A couple of times. In college.”

Adam went immobile. Completely motionless. His muscles flexed, coiled strong under her palms, and then they just stayed like that, tense and still as he stared up at her. “Olive.”

“But it doesn’t matter,” she hastened to add, because he was already shaking his head, pulling away from her. It really didn’t matter. Not to Olive, and therefore, it shouldn’t to Adam, either. “I can figure it out—I’ve learned whole-cell patch clamp in a couple of hours; sex can’t be much harder.

And I bet you do this all the time, so you can tell me how to —”

“You’d lose.”

The room was chilly. His finger was not inside her anymore, and his hand had left her hip.

“What?”

“You’d lose your bet.” He sighed, wiping a hand down his face. The other one, the one that had been inside her, moved down to adjust his cock. It looked enormous by now, and he winced as he touched it. “Olive, I can’t.”

“Of course you can.”

He shook his head. “I’m sorry.”

“What? No. No, I—”

“You’re basically a vir—”

“I’m not!”

“Olive.”

“I am not.”

“But so close to it that—”

“No, that’s not the way it works. Virginity is not a continuous variable, it’s categorical. Binary. Nominal. Dichotomous. Ordinal, potentially. I’m talking about chi-square, maybe Spearman’s correlation, logistic regression, the logit model and that stupid sigmoid function, and . . .”

It had been weeks and it still took her breath away, the uneven tilt of his smile. How unanticipated it always was, the dimples it formed. Olive was left without air as his large palm cupped the side of her face and brought it down for a slow, warm, laughing kiss.

“You are such a smart-ass,” he said against her mouth.

“Maybe.” She was smiling, too. And kissing him back. Hugging him, arms draped around his neck, and she felt a shiver of pleasure when he pulled her deeper into himself.

“Olive,” he said inching back, “if for any reason sex is something that you . . . that you’re not comfortable with, or that you’d rather not have outside of a relationship, then—”

“No. No, it’s nothing like that. I—” She took a deep breath, looking for a way to explain herself. “It’s not that I want to *not* have sex. I just . . . don’t particularly *want* to have it. There is something weird about my brain, and my body, and—I don’t know what’s wrong with me, but I don’t seem to be able to experience attraction like other people. Like *normal* people. I tried to just . . . to just do it, to get it over with, and the guy I did it with was nice, but the truth is that I just don’t feel any . . .” She closed her eyes. This was difficult to admit. “I don’t feel any sexual attraction unless I actually get to trust and like a person, which for some reason never happens. Or, almost never. It hadn’t, not in a long time, but now—I really like you, and I really trust you, and for the first time in a million years I want to—”

She couldn’t ramble anymore, because he was kissing her again, this time hard and bruising, as though he wanted to absorb her into himself. “I want to do this,” she said, as soon as she was able to. “With you. I really do.”

“Me too, Olive.” He sighed. “You have no idea.”

“Then, please. Please, don’t say no.” She bit her lip, and then his. And then nipped at his jaw. “Please?”

He took a deep breath and nodded. She smiled and kissed the curve of his neck, and his hand splayed against her lower back.

“But,” he said, “we should probably go about this a little differently.”

IT TOOK HER the longest time to realize his intentions. Not because she was stupid, or oblivious, or that naive about sex, but because . . .

Maybe she *was* a little naive about sex. But she truly hadn't thought about it for ages before Adam, and even then, it was never quite in these terms—him above her, pushing her legs wide open with his palms on her inner thighs and then kneeling between them. Sliding down, low.

"What are you—"

The way he parted her with his tongue, it was as though she was butter and he meant to slice through her like a hot knife. He was slow but sure, and didn't pause when Olive's thigh stiffened against his palm, or when she tried to squirm away. He just grunted, rich and low; then ran his nose in the skin at the juncture of her abdomen, inhaling deeply; and then he licked her once more.

"Adam—stop," she pleaded, and for a moment he just nuzzled his face against her folds like he had no intention of doing any such thing. Then he lifted his head, eyes foggy, as if aware that he should be listening to her.

"Mmm?" His lips vibrated against her.

"Maybe . . . maybe you should stop?"

He went still, his hand tightening around her thigh. "Have you changed your mind?"

"No. But we should do . . . other things."

He frowned. "You don't like this?"

"No. Yes. Well, I've never . . ." The line between his eyebrows deepened. "But I'm the one who put you up to this,

so we should do things that *you* are into, and not stuff for me . . .”

This time it was the flat of his tongue against her clit, pressing just enough to make her clench and exhale in a rush. The tip was circling around it, which—such a small movement, and yet it sent her hand straight to her mouth, had her biting the fleshy part of her palm.

“Adam!” Her voice sounded like someone else’s. “Did you hear what I . . . ?”

“You said to do something I’m into.” His breath was hot against her. “I am.”

“You can’t possibly want to—”

He squeezed her leg. “I can’t remember a moment I didn’t.”

It just didn’t feel like standard hookup fare, something this intimate. But it was hard to protest when he looked spellbound, staring at her, at her face and her legs and the rest of her body. His hand was large, open over her abdomen and holding her down, inching higher and closer to her breasts, but never close enough. Lying like this, Olive was a little embarrassed of how concave her stomach was. Of the way her ribs stuck out. Adam, though, didn’t seem to mind.

“Wouldn’t you rather—”

A nip. “No.”

“I didn’t even say—”

He glanced up. “There isn’t anything I’d rather do.”

“But—”

He sucked on one of her lips with a loud, wet noise, and she gasped. And then his tongue was inside her, and she moaned, half in surprise, half at the feeling of— Yes.

Yes.

"Fuck," someone said. It wasn't Olive, so it must have been Adam. "Fuck." It felt incredible. Otherworldly. His tongue, dipping in and out, circling and lapping, and his nose against her skin, and the quiet sounds he made from deep in his chest whenever she contracted, and Olive was going to—she . . .

She wasn't sure she was going to come. Not with another person in the room touching her. "This might take a while," she said apologetically, hating how thin her voice sounded.

"Fuck, yes." His tongue swiped the entirety of her, a long, broad stroke. "Please." She didn't think she'd ever heard him quite this enthusiastic about anything, not even grant writing or computational biology. It kicked the whole thing a few notches higher for her, and it got worse when she noticed his arm. The one that wasn't cupping the cheek of her ass and holding her open.

He hadn't taken himself out of his pants yet, that Olive could see, and wasn't that unfair, since she was all splayed open for him. But the way his arm was shifting, how his hand was moving up and down slowly, that was just unbearable. She arched further, her spine shaping a perfect curve as the back of her head hit the pillow.

"Olive." He leaned back a few centimeters and kissed the inside of her shaking thigh. Took a deep breath with his nose, as if to hold the smell of her within himself. "You can't come yet." His lips brushed against her folds as his tongue dipped in again, and she squeezed her eyes shut. There was a liquid, burning heat blossoming in her tummy, spilling all over her. Her fingers clawed at the sheets, grasping for an anchor. This was impossible. Unmanageable.

"Adam."

“Don’t. Two more minutes.” He sucked on— *God,* yes. *There.*

“I’m—sorry.”

“One more.”

“I *can’t*—”

“Focus, Olive.”

In the end, it was his voice that ruined everything. That quiet, possessive tone, the hint of an order in the low rasp of his words, and the pleasure broke over her like an ocean wave. Her mind snapped, and she was not wholly herself for seconds, and then minutes, and when she had a sense of the world again, he was still licking her, except more slowly, as if with no purpose but to savor her. “I want to go down on you until you pass out.” His lips were so soft against her skin.

“No.” Olive fisted the pillow. “I—you can’t.”

“Why?”

“I have to . . .” She couldn’t think straight, not quite yet. Her mind was addled, stuttering.

She almost screamed when he pushed one finger inside. This time it sank like a rock into water, smooth and without obstacle, and her walls clamped on it as if to welcome Adam and hold him inside.

“Jesus.” He licked her clit again, and she was too sensitive for this. Maybe. “You are”—he hooked his finger inside her, pressing against the roof of her channel, and the pleasure welled in her, washing against her edges—“so small and tight and warm.”

The heat flooded within her once more, knocked the air out of her lungs, leaving her openmouthed, bright colors bursting behind her eyelids. He groaned something that was not quite coherent, and slid in another finger on the tail end of her

orgasm, and the taut stretch of it, it was ruinous. Her body bloomed into something that didn't belong to her anymore, something made of bright, high peaks and lush valleys. It left her heavy and boneless, and she was not sure how long went by before she could bear to raise her palm to his forehead and gently push him away to get him to stop. He shot her a sullen glance but complied, and Olive tugged him up—because he looked like he might start again any moment, and because it would be nice, to have him next to her. Maybe he was thinking the same: he lifted himself above her, leaning his weight on his forearm; his chest pushed against her breast, one large thigh lodged firmly between her legs.

She was still wearing her stupid knee socks, and *God*, Adam was probably thinking that she was the lamest lay he'd ever—

"Can I fuck you?"

He said it, and then he kissed her, unconcerned with where his mouth had been just seconds earlier. She wondered if she should be put off by that, but she was still twitching with pleasure, contracting with aftershocks at the memory of what he'd just done. She couldn't make herself care, and it was nice to kiss him like this. So nice.

"Mmm." Her palms came up to cup his face, and she began to trace his cheekbones with her thumbs. They were red, and hot. "What?"

"Can I fuck you?" He sucked the base of her throat. "Please?" He breathed it against the shell of her ear, and—it wasn't as though she could say no. Or wanted to. She nodded her permission and reached for his cock, but he beat her to it and pulled down his pants, closing his fist around it. He was big. Larger than she'd thought he'd be, than she'd thought anyone could be. She could still feel his heart pounding

rapidly against her chest as he aligned himself to her and nudged the head against her opening and—

Olive was lax now. And pliant. And still not loose enough. "*Ah*." It didn't quite hurt, but it was nearly too much. Definitely not easy. And yet, that sensation, the push of him against every part of her, it held a promise. "You're so big."

He groaned into her neck. His entire body was vibrating with tension. "You can take it."

"I can," she told him, voice reedy, and her breath caught halfway through the second word. Women gave birth, after all. Except that he was not in, not really. Not even half. And there was just no more room.

Olive looked up at him. His eyes were closed, dark half-moons against his skin, and his jaw was tense. "What if it's too much?"

Adam lowered his lips to her ear. "Then . . ." He attempted a thrust, and maybe it was too much, but the friction was lovely. "Then I'll fuck you like this." She squeezed her eyes shut when he hit a place that made her whimper. "God, Olive."

Her entire body was pulsating. "Is there something I should be . . ."

"Just . . ." He kissed her collarbone. Their breathing was erratic by now, loud in the silence of the room. "Be quiet for a moment. So I don't come already."

Olive canted her hips, and he was rubbing that spot again. It made her thighs tremble, and she tried to open them wider. To invite him inside. "Maybe you should."

"I should?"

She nodded. They were too dazed to kiss with any kind of coordination by this point, but his lips were hot and soft when they brushed against hers. "Yes."

“Inside you?”

“If you—”

Adam’s hand came up behind Olive’s knee and angled it just so, spreading her legs in a way she simply hadn’t thought of. Firmly holding her open.

“If you want to.”

“You’re so perfect, you’re driving me insane.”

Her insides opened to him without warning. They welcomed and pulled at him until he bottomed out, until he was wedged deep and stretching her to a point that should be breaking, but just made her feel filled, sealed, perfect.

They both exhaled. Olive lifted a hand, closed it shakily around Adam’s sweaty nape.

“Hey.” She smiled up at him.

He smiled back, just a little. “Hey.”

His eyes were opaque, like stained glass. He moved inside her, just a hint of a thrust, and it made her entire body clench around him, until she could feel his cock twitch and pulsate inside her, like a drum. Her head fell to the pillow, and someone was groaning, something guttural and out of control.

Then Adam pulled out, pushed back in, and they annihilated the no-sex rule. In the span of a few seconds his thrusts went from tentative, exploratory, to fast and all-eclipsing. His hand slid to the small of her back, lifting her into him as he piled in, and in, and in again, rubbing inside her, against her, forcing pleasure to vibrate up her spine.

“Is this okay?” he asked against her ear, not quite managing to stop.

Olive couldn’t answer. Not past the sharp hitch of her breath, the way her fingers dug desperately into the sheets. Pressure built again inside her, swelled large and consuming.

“You have to tell me, if you don’t like it,” he rasped. “What I’m doing.” He was eager, a little clumsy, losing control and slipping out of her, having to nudge his cock back inside; he was out of focus, but so was she, too flooded by how good he felt, how stupefying the pleasure, how smoothly he slid in and out. How right this felt.

“I—”

“Olive, you have to—” He stopped with a grunt, because she canted her hips and clenched around him. Gripping him harder, sucking him deeper.

“I like it.” She reached up to fist her fingers in his hair. To catch his eyes, make sure he was paying attention as she said, “I *love* it, Adam.”

His control poured out. He made a crude noise and shuddered, pumping hard and muttering nonsense into her skin —how perfect she was, how beautiful, how long he’d wanted this, how he would never, *could* never let go of her. Olive felt his orgasm soar, the blinding, scalding pleasure as he trembled on top of her.

She smiled. And when new shivers began to roll down her spine, she bit Adam’s shoulder and let herself go under.

Chapter Seventeen

HYPOTHESIS: *When I think I've hit rock bottom, someone will hand me a shovel. That someone is probably Tom Benton.*

Olive drifted off after the first time, and dreamed of many strange, nonsensical things. Sushi rolls shaped like spiders. The first snowfall in Toronto, during her last year with her mother. Adam's dimples. Tom Benton's sneer as he spat the words "little sob story." Adam, again, this time serious, saying her name in his unique way.

Then she felt the mattress dip, and the sound of something being placed on the nightstand. She slowly blinked awake, disoriented in the dim light of the room. Adam was sitting on the side of the bed, pushing a lock of hair behind her ear.

"Hi." She smiled.

"Hey."

Her hand reached out to touch his thigh through the pants he'd never managed to take all the way off. He was still warm, still solid. Still there.

"How long did I sleep?"

"Not long. Maybe thirty minutes."

"Hmm." She stretched a bit against the mattress, arms above her head, and noticed the fresh glass of water on the nightstand. "Is that for me?"

He nodded, handed it to her, and she propped up on her elbow to drink it, smiling in thanks. She noticed his gaze linger on her breasts, still tender and sore from his mouth, and then drift away to his own palms.

Oh. Maybe, now that they had sex—*good sex*, Olive thought, *amazing sex*, though who knew about Adam?—he needed his own space. Maybe he wanted his own damn pillow.

She returned the empty glass and sat up. "I should move to my bed."

He shook his head with an intensity that suggested that he didn't want her to go, not anywhere, not ever. His free hand closed tight around her waist, as if to tether her to him.

Olive didn't mind.

"You sure? I suspect I might be a cover hog."

"It's fine. I run warm." He brushed a strand of hair from her forehead. "And according to someone, I look like I might snore."

She gasped in mock outrage. "How *dare* they? Tell me who said that and I will personally avenge you—" She yelped when he held the icy-cool glass against her neck, and then dissolved into laughter, drawing up her knees and trying to twist away from him. "I'm sorry—you don't snore! You sleep like a prince!"

"Damn right." He set the glass on the nightstand, appeased, but Olive remained curled up, cheeks flushed and breathing hard from fending him off. He was smiling. With dimples, too. The same smile he'd smiled into her neck earlier, against her skin, the one that had tickled her and made her laugh.

"I'm sorry about the socks, by the way." She winced. "I know it's a controversial topic."

Adam looked down at the rainbow-colored material stretched around her calves. "Socks are controversial?"

"Not socks per se. Just, keeping them on during sex?"

"Really?"

“Totally. At least according to the issue of *Cosmopolitan* we keep at home to swat cockroaches.”

He shrugged, like a man who’d only ever read the *New England Journal of Medicine* and maybe *Truck-Pushing Digest*. “Why would anyone care one way or the other?”

“Maybe they don’t want to unknowingly have sex with people with horrible, disfigured toes?”

“Do you have disfigured toes?”

“Truly grotesque. Circus-worthy. Antithetical to sex. Basically a built-in contraceptive.”

He sighed, clearly amused. He was struggling to hold on to his moody, broody, intense act, and Olive *loved* it.

“I’ve seen you in flip-flops multiple times. Which, by the way, are not lab compliant.”

“You must be mistaken.”

“Really.”

“I don’t like what you’re insinuating, Dr. Carlsen. I take the Stanford environmental health and safety guidelines very seriously and— What are *you*—”

He was so much larger than her, he could hold her down with one hand on her belly as he wrestled her out of her socks, and for some reason she loved every moment of it. She put up a good fight, and maybe he’d have a couple of bruises tomorrow, but when he finally managed to take them off, Olive was out of breath from laughing. Adam caressed her feet reverently, as though they were delicate and perfectly shaped instead of belonging to someone who ran two marathons a year.

“You were right,” he said. Chest heaving, she looked at him curiously. “Your feet are pretty hideous.”

“What?” She gasped and freed herself, pushing at his shoulder until he ended up on his back under her. He surely could have unseated her, giant that he was. And yet. “Take it back.”

“You said it first.”

“Take it back. My feet are cute.”

“In a hideous way, maybe.”

“That’s *not* a thing.”

His laugh blew warm against her cheek. “There’s probably a German word for that. Cute, but exceptionally ugly.”

She bit his lip just enough to make him feel it, and Adam—he seemed to lose that grip he always had on himself. He seemed to suddenly want more, and he flipped them until she was underneath him, turning the bite into a kiss. Or maybe it was Olive herself, since her tongue was licking his lip, exactly where she’d made it sting.

She should probably tell him to stop. She was sweaty and sticky, and should excuse herself and go take a shower. Yes, that sounded like good sex etiquette. But he felt warm and strong, positively glowing. He smelled delicious, even after all they’d done, and she couldn’t help getting sidetracked and letting her arms loop around his neck. Pulling him down.

“You weigh a ton,” she told him. He made to move up and away, but she wrapped her legs around his waist, holding him close. She felt so safe with him. Invincible. A true slayer. He turned her into a powerful, ferocious person, one that could destroy Tom Benton and pancreatic cancer before breakfast.

“No, I love it. Stay, please.” She grinned up at him, and saw his breathing speed up.

“You *are* a cover hog.” There was a spot at the base of her neck that he’d found earlier, a spot that made her sigh and arch

up and melt into the pillow. He attacked it like it was his new true north. He had a way of kissing her, half cautious and half unrestrained, that had her wondering why she used to think of kissing as such a boring, aimless activity.

"I should go clean up," she said, but didn't make a move. He slid down, just a couple of inches, just enough to get distracted by her collarbone, and then by the curve of her breast. "Adam."

He ignored her and traced her jutting hip bones, and her ribs, the taut skin of her belly. He kissed every last freckle, as though to store them up in his memory, and there were so many. "I'm all sticky, Adam." She squirmed a little.

In response, his palm moved to her ass. To keep her still. "Ssh. I'll clean you up myself."

He put his finger inside her and she gasped, because— Oh God. Oh. Oh *God*. She could hear the wet noises down there, from herself and his own come, and he should be disgusted by this, and she should, too, and yet—

She wasn't. And he was groaning, as if the satisfaction of having made a mess of her, inside her, of knowing that she'd let him, was a heady thing for him. Olive closed her eyes and let herself go under, feeling him lick the skin between her thigh and abdomen, hearing low moans and gasps coming out of her own mouth, sliding her fingers in his hair to grip him more tightly against her. She was definitely clean by the time she came, slow contractions that swelled in large waves and had her thighs shaking around his head, and that was when he asked, "Can I fuck you again?"

She looked up at him, flushed and hazy with her orgasm, and bit her lip. She wanted to. She really wanted to have him on top of her, inside her, chest pushing her into the mattress and arms snaked around her body. That feeling of security, of

finally belonging that seemed to get more intense the closer he got to her.

“I want to.” Her hand came up to touch his arm, the one he was holding himself up on. “It’s just—I’m just sore, and I—”

He immediately regretted asking. She could tell by how his body stilled before he got off her, as if to not crowd her, as if to give her space she didn’t want.

“No,” she panicked. “It’s not that—”

“Hey.” He noticed how flustered she was and bent down to kiss her.

“I do want to—”

“Olive.” He curled around her. His cock rubbed against her lower back, but he instantly angled his hips away. “You’re right. Let’s go to sleep.”

“What? No.” She sat up, frowning. “I don’t want to go to sleep.”

He was struggling, she could tell. Trying to hide his erection. Trying not to glance at her naked body. “Your flight was early this morning. You’re probably jet-lagged—”

“But we only have one night.” One single night. One night for Olive to suspend the outside world. To avoid thinking about Tom, and what had happened earlier today, and the mysterious woman Adam was in love with. One night to forget that whatever feelings she had for him, they were not mutual.

“Hey.” He reached up, pushing her hair behind her shoulder. “You don’t owe me anything. Let’s get some sleep and—”

“We have one night.” Determined, she pressed her palm on his chest, straddling him. The cotton of his pants was soft against her folds. “I want the whole night.” She smiled down at him, forehead against his, her hair a curtain between them

and the outside world. A sanctuary of sorts. He gripped her waist like he couldn't help himself, pulling her against him, and oh, they fit so well together. "Come on, Adam. I know you're old, but you can't go to sleep just yet."

"I—" He seemed to forget what he was about to say the moment her hand slid inside his pants. His eyes closed, and he exhaled sharply, and—yes. Good. "Olive."

"Yes?"

She kept on sliding down his body. And tugging at his pants. And he made some half-hearted efforts to stop her, but he didn't seem to be fully in control, and in the end he let her take his remaining clothes off. She pulled her hair back and sat on her heels between his thighs.

Adam tried to look away and failed. "You are so beautiful." The words were low and hushed, as though they'd slipped out of his mouth. Loose and unbidden, just like everything else about this.

"I've never done this," she confessed. She didn't feel shy, probably because this was Adam.

"No. Come here."

"So it probably won't be any good."

"You—Olive. You don't have to. You shouldn't."

"Noted." She pressed a kiss against his hip, and he groaned as though she'd done something special. As though this was beyond anything. "But if you have any wishes."

"Olive. I'm going to—" Grunt. He was going to grunt, a rumbling noise coming from deep in his chest. She ran her nose on the skin of his abdomen, seeing his cock twitch with the corner of her eye.

"I love the way you smell."

"Olive."

Slowly, precisely, she wrapped her hand around the base of his erection and studied it from underneath her eyelashes. The head was shiny already, and—she didn't know much, but he seemed close. He seemed very hard, and above her his chest heaved and his lips parted and his skin flushed. He seemed like it wouldn't take much, which . . . good. But also, Olive wanted her time with him. She wanted so much time with Adam. "Someone has done this to you, before? Right?"

He nodded, like she'd expected he would. His hand fisted the sheets, trembling slightly.

"Good. So you can tell me, if I mess it up."

She said the last word against the shaft, and it felt like they were oscillating, vibrating at some short-wave frequency that burst and shattered when she touched him for real. Before parting her lips on the head of his cock she looked up at him, gave him a small smile, and that seemed to do him in. His back arched. He groaned, and ordered her in hushed tones to please, give him a moment, go slow, not let him come, and Olive wondered if his spine was melting into the same liquid, scalding pleasure she'd felt earlier.

It probably couldn't have been more obvious, that she'd never done this. And yet it seemed to turn him on beyond belief. He clearly couldn't help himself—he thrust forward, threaded his fingers in her hair, pressed her head down until her throat was tight around him. He groaned, and talked, and caught her eyes, as if constantly fascinated by the way she was looking up at him. He slurred raspy words, mumbling, "Olive, yes." "Lick the . . ." "Take it just—deeper. Make me come." She heard praises and endearments come out of his mouth—how good she was, how lovely, how perfect; obscenities about her lips and body and eyes, and maybe she would have been embarrassed, if it hadn't been for the pleasure spilling rich from both of them, overflowing their brains. It felt natural, to have Adam ask for what he wanted. To give it to him.

“Can I—?” Her teeth grazed the underside of the head, and he grunted abruptly. “In your mouth.”

She only had to smile at him, and his pleasure looked nuclear, pounding through him and washing over his entire body. What Olive had felt earlier, white-hot and just shy of painful. She was still sucking gently when he regained control of his limbs and cupped her cheek.

“The things I want to do to you. You have no idea.”

“I think maybe I do.” She licked her lips. “Some, at least.” His eyes were glazed as he stroked the corner of her mouth, and Olive wondered how she could possibly be done with this, with *him*, in just a few hours.

“I doubt it.”

She leaned forward, hiding a smile into the crease of his thigh. “You can, you know.” She nibbled on the hard plane of his abdomen and then looked up at him. “Do them.”

She was still smiling when he pulled her up to his chest, and for a few minutes they managed to sleep.

IT REALLY WAS a nice hotel room, she supposed. The large windows, mostly. And the view of Boston after dark, the traffic and the clouds and the feeling that something was happening out there, something she didn’t need to be part of because she was here. With Adam.

“What language is that?” it occurred to her to ask. He couldn’t quite look at her face, not with her head nestled under his chin, so he continued to draw patterns on her hip with his fingertips.

“What?”

“The book you’re reading. With the tiger on the cover. German?”

“Dutch.” She felt his voice vibrate, from his chest and through her flesh.

“Is it a manual on taxidermy?”

He pinched her hip, lightly, and she giggled. “Was it hard to learn? Dutch, I mean.”

He inhaled the scent of her hair, thinking for a moment. “I’m not sure. I always knew it.”

“Was it weird? Growing up with two languages?”

“Not really. I mostly thought in Dutch until we moved back here.”

“How old was that?”

“Mmm. Nine?”

It made her smile, the idea of child Adam. “Did you speak Dutch with your parents?”

“No.” He paused. “There were au pairs, mostly. Lots of them.”

Olive pushed herself up to look at him, resting her chin on her hands and her hands on his chest. She watched him watch her, enjoying the play of the streetlights on his strong face. He was always handsome, but now, in the witching hours, he took her breath away.

“Were your parents busy?”

He sighed. “They were very committed to their jobs. Not very good at making time for anything else.”

She hummed softly, conjuring a mental image: five-year-old Adam showing a stick-figure drawing to tall, distracted parents in dark suits surrounded by secret agents speaking into

their headsets. She knew nothing about diplomats. “Were you a happy child?”

“It’s . . . complicated. It was a bit of a textbook upbringing. Only child of financially rich but emotionally poor parents. I could do whatever I wanted but had no one to do it with.” It sounded sad. Olive and her mom had always had very little, but she’d never felt alone. Until the cancer.

“Except Holden?”

He smiled. “Except Holden, but that was later. I think I was already set in my ways by then. I’d learned to entertain myself with . . . things. Hobbies. Activities. School. And when I was supposed to be with people, I was . . . antagonistic and unapproachable.” She rolled her eyes and bit softly into his skin, making him chuckle. “I’ve become like my parents,” he mused. “Exclusively committed to my job.”

“That’s not true at all. You’re very good at making time for others. For me.” She smiled, but he looked away as if embarrassed, and she decided to change the topic. “The only thing I can say in Dutch is ‘*ik hou van jou*.’” Her pronunciation must have been poor, because for a long moment Adam couldn’t parse it. Then he did, and his eyes widened.

“My college roommate had a poster with ‘I love you’ written in every language,” Olive explained. “Right across from my bed. First thing I’d see every morning after waking up.”

“And at the end of year four you knew every language?”

“End of year one. She joined a sorority as a sophomore, which was for the best.” She lowered her gaze, nuzzled her face in his chest, and then looked back up at him. “It’s pretty stupid, if you think about it.”

“Stupid?”

“Who needs to know how to say ‘I love you’ in every language? People barely need it in one. Sometimes not even in one.” She smoothed his hair back with her fingers. “ ‘Where’s the restroom?’ on the other hand . . .”

He leaned into her touch, as if soothed by it. “*Waar is de WC?*”

Olive blinked.

“That would be ‘Where’s the restroom?’ ” he explained.

“Yeah, I figured. Just . . . your voice . . .” She cleared her throat. She’d been better off without knowing how attractive he sounded when speaking another language. “Anyway. That would be a useful poster.” She brushed her finger against his forehead. “What’s this from?”

“My face?”

“The little scar. The one above your eyebrow.”

“Ah. Just a stupid fight.”

“A fight?” She chuckled. “Did one of your grads try to kill you?”

“Nah, I was a kid. Though I could see my grads pouring acetonitrile in my coffee.”

“Oh, totally.” She nodded in agreement. “I have one, too.” She pulled her hair behind her shoulder and showed him the small, half-moon-shaped line right next to her temple.

“I know.”

“You know? About my scar?”

He nodded.

“When did you notice? It’s really faint.”

He shrugged and began tracing it with his thumb. “What’s it from?”

“I don’t remember. But my mom said that when I was four there was this *huge* snowstorm in Toronto. Inches upon inches of snow piling up, the most intense in five decades, you know the drill. And everyone knew it was coming, and she’d been preparing me for days, telling me that we might end up stuck at home for a few days. I was so excited about it that I ran outside and dove headfirst into the snow—except that I did it about half an hour after the storm had started, and ended up hitting my head on a stone.” She laughed softly, and so did Adam. It had been one of her mother’s favorite stories. And now Olive was the only person who could tell it. It lived in her, and no one else. “I miss the snow. California is beautiful, and I hate the cold. But I really miss the snow.”

He continued stroking her scar, a faint smile on his lips. And then, when the silence had settled around them, he said, “Boston will have snow. Next year.”

Her heart thudded. “Yeah.” Except that she wouldn’t be going to Boston, not anymore. She’d have to find another lab. Or not work in a lab at all.

Adam’s hand traveled up her neck, closing gently around her nape. “There are good trails for hiking, where Holden and I used to go in grad school.” He hesitated before adding, “I’d love to take you.”

She closed her eyes, and for a second she let herself imagine it. The black of Adam’s hair against the white snow and the deep greens of the trees. Her boots sinking into the soft ground. Cold air flowing inside her lungs, and a warm hand wrapping around her own. She could almost see the flakes, fluttering behind her eyelids. Bliss.

“You’ll be in California, though,” she said distractedly.

A pause. Too long.

Olive opened her eyes. “Adam?”

He rolled his tongue inside his cheek, as if thinking carefully about his words. “There is a chance that I’ll be moving to Boston.”

She blinked at him, confused. Moving? He’d be moving? “What?” No. What was he saying? Adam was not going to leave Stanford, right? He’d never been—the flight risk had never been *real*. Right?

Except he’d never said that. Olive thought back to their conversations, and—he’d complained about the department withholding his research funds, about them suspecting that he was going to leave, about the assumptions people had made because of his collaboration with Tom, but . . . he’d never said that they were wrong. He’d said that the frozen funds had been earmarked for research—for the current year. That’s why he’d wanted them released as soon as possible.

“Harvard,” she whispered, feeling incredibly stupid. “You’re moving to Harvard.”

“It’s not decided yet.” His hand was still wrapped around her neck, thumb swiping back and forth across the pulse at the base of her throat. “I’ve been asked to interview, but there’s no official offer.”

“When? When will you interview?” she asked, but didn’t really need his answer. It was all starting to make sense in her head. “Tomorrow. You’re not going home.” He’d never said he would. He’d only told her he’d be leaving the conference early. Oh God. *Stupid, Olive. Stupid*. “You’re going to Harvard. To interview for the rest of the week.”

“It was the only way to avoid making the department even more suspicious,” he explained. “The conference was a good cover.”

She nodded. It wasn’t good—it was perfect. And God, she felt nauseous. And weak-kneed, even lying down. “They’ll offer you the position,” she murmured, even though he must

already know. He was Adam Carlsen, after all. And he'd been asked to interview. They were *courting* him.

"It's not certain yet."

It was. Of course it was. "Why Harvard?" she blurted. "Why—why do you want to leave Stanford?" Her voice shook a little, even though she did her best to sound calm.

"My parents live on the East Coast, and while I have my issues with them, they're going to need me close sooner or later." He paused, but Olive could tell that he wasn't done. She braced herself. "The main reason is Tom. And the grant. I want to transition to doing more similar work, but that will only be possible if we show good results. Being in the same department as Tom would make us infinitely more productive. Professionally, moving's a no-brainer."

She'd braced herself, but it still felt like a punch in the sternum that left her void of air, caused her stomach to twist and her heart to drop. Tom. This was about *Tom*.

"Of course," she whispered. It helped her voice sound firmer. "It makes sense."

"And I could help you acclimatize, too," he offered, significantly more bashful. "If you want to. To Boston. To Tom's lab. Show you around, if you . . . if you're feeling lonely. Buy you that pumpkin stuff."

She couldn't answer that. She really—she could *not* answer that. So she hung her head for a few moments, ordered herself to buck the hell up, and lifted it again to smile at him.

She could do this. She *would* do this. "What time are you leaving tomorrow?" He was probably just moving to another hotel, closer to the Harvard campus.

"Early."

“Okay.” She leaned forward and buried her face in his throat. They were not going to sleep, not one second. It would be such a waste. “You don’t have to wake me up, when you leave.”

“You’re not going to carry my bags downstairs?”

She laughed into his neck and burrowed deeper into him. This, she thought, this was going to be their perfect night. And their last.

Chapter Eighteen

HYPOTHESIS: *A heart will break even more easily than the weakest of hydrogen bonds.*

It wasn't the sun high in the sky that woke her up, nor housekeeping—thanks to Adam, likely, and a Do Not Disturb sign on the door. What got Olive out of bed, even though she really, *really* didn't want to face the day, was the frantic buzzing on the nightstand.

She buried her face in the pillow, extended her arm to grope her way to her phone, and then brought it to her ear.

"Yeah?" she bleated, only to find that it wasn't a call but a very long string of notifications. It included one email from Dr. Aslan congratulating her on her talk and asking for the recording, two texts from Greg (Have u seen the multichannel pipette? Nvm found it.), one from Malcolm (call me when you see this), and . . .

One hundred and forty-three from Anh.

"What the . . . ?" She blinked at the screen, unlocked her phone, and started scrolling up. Could it be one hundred and forty-three reminders to wear sunscreen?

Anh: O

Anh: M

Anh: G

Anh: OMG

Anh: Omg omg OMFG

Anh: Where the hell are you

Anh: OLIVE

Anh: OLIVE LOUISE SMITH

Anh: (JK I know you don't have a middle name)

Anh: (But if you did it would be Louise FIGHT ME you know im right)

Anh: Where ARE U?!?!?

Anh: Your missing so much YOU ARE MISSING SO

Anh: WHERE THE HELL IS YOUR ROOM I'M COMING TO YOU

Anh: OL we need to talk about this IN PERSON!!!!!1!!!!!!!!

Anh: Are you DEAD?

Anh: You better be IT'S THE ONLY WAY I'LL FORGIVE YOU FOR MISSING THIS OL

Anh: Ol is this real life is iT jUST FANTASY SJFGAJHSGFASF

Anh: OOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOL

Olive groaned, rubbed her face, and decided to skip the other 125 messages and text Anh her room number. She went into the bathroom and reached for her toothbrush, trying not to notice that the spot where Adam's had been was now empty. Whatever Anh was freaking out about, Olive was likely going to be underwhelmed. Jeremy had Irish step-danced at the department social, or Chase had tied a cherry stem with his tongue. Great entertainment value, for sure, but Olive would survive missing either.

She dried her face, thinking that she was doing a great job of not thinking of how sore she was; of how her body was buzzing, vibrating like it had no intention of stopping, not two, not three, not five hours from now; of the faint, comforting scent of Adam on her skin.

Yeah. A great job.

When she stepped out of the bathroom, someone was about to tear down the door. She opened it to find Anh and Malcolm,

who hugged her and started talking so loudly and rapidly, she could barely make out the words—though she did catch the terms "paradigm-shifting," "life-altering," and "watershed moment in history."

They chattered their way to Olive's unused bed and sat down. After a few more moments of overlapping babbling, Olive decided to intervene and lifted her hands.

"Hold on." She was already coming down with a headache. Today was going to be a nightmare, for so many reasons. "What happened?"

"The weirdest thing," Anh said.

"Coolest," Malcolm interrupted. "She means coolest."

"Where *were* you, Ol? You said you were going to join us."

"Here. I just, um, was tired after my talk, and fell asleep and—"

"Lame, Ol, *very* lame, but I have no time to berate you for your lameness because I need to catch you up with what happened last night—"

"*I* should tell her," Malcolm gave Anh a scathing look. "Since it's about me."

"Fair enough," she conceded with a flourishing gesture.

Malcolm smiled, pleased, and cleared his throat. "Ol, who have I been wanting to have sex with for the past several years?"

"Uh . . ." She scratched her temple. Off the top of her head, she could name about thirty people. "Victoria Beckham?"

"No. Well, yes. But no."

"David Beckham?"

"Also yes. But no."

"The other Spice Girl? The one in the Adidas tracksuit—"

“No. Okay, yes, but don’t focus on celebrities, focus on *real life* people—”

“Holden Rodrigues,” Anh blurted out impatiently. “He hooked up with Rodrigues at the department social. Ol, it is with utmost regret that I must inform you that you have been dethroned and are no longer the president of the Hot for Teacher club. Will you retire in shame or accept the treasurer position?”

Olive blinked. Several times. An inordinate amount of times. And then heard herself say, “Wow.”

“Isn’t it the weirdest—”

“Coolest, Anh,” Malcolm interjected. “*Coolest*.”

“Things can be weird in a cool way.”

“Right, but this is pure, one hundred percent cool, zero percent weird—”

“Hold up,” Olive interrupted. Her headache was growing a size or two. “Holden is not even in the department. Why was he at the social?”

“No idea, but you bring up an excellent point, which is that since he’s in pharmacology, we can do whatever we want without having to tell anyone.”

Anh tilted her head. “Is that so?”

“Yep. We checked Stanford’s socialization regulations on our way to CVS to get condoms. Basically foreplay.” He closed his eyes in bliss. “Will I ever step inside a pharmacy again without getting a boner?”

Olive cleared her throat. “I’m so happy for you.” She really was. Though this did feel a bit weird. “How did it happen?”

“I hit on him. It was glorious.”

“He was shameless, Ol. *And* glorious. I took some pictures.”

Malcolm gasped in outrage. “Okay, that’s illegal and I could sue you. But if I look good in them, do send them my way.”

“Will do, babe. Now tell us about the sex.”

The fact that Malcolm, usually very forward with the details of his sex life, just closed his eyes and smiled, spoke volumes. Anh and Olive exchanged a long, impressed glance.

“And that’s not even the best part. He wants to see me again. Today. A *date*. He used the word ‘date’ unprompted.” He fell back on the mattress. “He’s so hot. And funny. And nice. A sweet, filthy beast.”

Malcolm looked so happy, Olive couldn’t resist: she swallowed the lump that had taken residence in her throat sometime last night and jumped on the bed next to him, hugging him as tight as she could. Anh followed and did the same.

“I’m so happy for you, Malcolm.”

“Same.” Anh’s voice was muffled against his hair.

“I am happy for me, too. I hope he’s serious. You know when I said I was training for gold? Well, Holden’s *platinum*.”

“You should ask Carlsen, Ol,” Anh suggested. “If he knows what Holden’s intentions are.”

She probably wasn’t going to have the opportunity anytime soon. “I will.”

Malcolm shifted a bit and turned to Olive. “Did you really fall asleep last night? Or were you and Carlsen celebrating in unmentionable ways?”

“Celebrating?”

“I told Holden that I was worried about you, and he said that you guys were probably celebrating. Something about Carlsen’s funds being released? By the way, you never told me Carlsen and Holden were best friends—it seems like a piece of information you’d want to share with your Holden-Rodrigues-fan-club-founder-and-most-vocal-member roommate—”

“Wait.” Olive sat up, wide-eyed. “The funds that were released, are they . . . the frozen ones? The ones Stanford was withholding?”

“Maybe? Holden said something about the department chair finally easing up. I tried to pay attention, but talking about Carlsen is a bit of a buzzkill—no offense. Plus, I kept getting lost in Holden’s eyes.”

“And his butt,” Anh added.

“And his butt.” Malcolm sighed happily. “Such a nice butt. He has little dimples on his lower back.”

“Oh my God, so does Jeremy! I want to bite them.”

“Aren’t they the cutest?”

Olive stopped listening and stood from the bed, grabbing her phone to read the date.

September twenty-ninth.

It was September twenty-ninth.

She had known, of course. She had known for over a month that today was coming, but in the past week she’d been too busy fretting about her talk to focus on anything else, and Adam hadn’t reminded her. With everything that had happened in the past twenty-four hours, it was no surprise that he’d forgotten to mention that his funds had been released. But still. The implications of it were . . .

She closed her eyes, shut tight, while Anh and Malcolm’s excited chattering kept rising in volume in the background.

When she opened them, her phone lit up with a new notification. From Adam.

Adam: I have interview meetings until 4:30, but I'm free for the night. Would you like to get dinner? There are several good restaurants near campus (though a shameful lack of conveyor belts). If you're not busy, I could show you around campus, maybe even Tom's lab.

Adam: No pressure, of course.

It was almost two in the afternoon. Olive felt as though her bones weighed twice as much as the day before. She took a deep breath, straightened her shoulders, and began typing her reply to Adam.

She knew what she had to do.

SHE KNOCKED ON his door at five sharp, and he answered just a few seconds later, still dressed in slacks and a button-down that must have been his interview attire and . . .

Smiling at her. Not one of those half-baked things she'd gotten used to, but a real, true smile. With dimples, and crinkles around his eyes, and genuine happiness to see her. It shattered her heart in a million pieces before he even spoke.

"Olive."

She still hadn't figured it out, why the way he said her name was so unique. There was something packed behind it, something that didn't quite make it to the surface. A sense of possibilities. Of depth. Olive wondered if it was real, if she was hallucinating it, if he was aware. Olive wondered a lot of things, and then told herself to stop. It couldn't matter less, now.

"Come in."

It was an even fancier hotel, and Olive rolled her eyes, wondering why people felt the need to waste thousands of dollars in lodgings for Adam Carlsen when he barely paid attention to his surroundings. They should just give him a cot and donate the money to worthy causes. Endangered whales. Psoriasis. Olive.

"I brought this—I'm assuming it's yours." She took a couple of steps toward him and held out a phone charger, letting the cable end dangle, making sure that Adam wouldn't need to touch her.

"It is. Thank you."

"It was behind the bedside lamp, probably why you forgot it." She pressed her lips together. "Or maybe it's old age. Maybe dementia has already set in. All those amyloid plaques."

He glared at her, and she tried not to smile, but she already was, and he was rolling his eyes and calling her a smart-ass, and—

Here they were. Doing this, again. Dammit.

She let her eyes wander away, because—no. Not anymore. "How was the interview?"

"Good. Just day one, though."

"Of how many?"

"Too many." He sighed. "I have grant meetings with Tom scheduled, too."

Tom. Right. Of course. Of course—this was why she was here. To explain to him that—

"Thank you for coming out," he said, voice quiet and earnest. As though by hopping on a train and agreeing to see him, Olive had given him a great deal of pleasure. "I figured you might be busy with your friends."

She shook her head. “No. Anh’s out with Jeremy.”

“I’m sorry,” he said, looking genuinely regretful for her, and it took Olive several moments to recall her lie, and his assumption that she was in love with Jeremy. Only a few weeks earlier, but it already seemed so long ago, when she hadn’t been able to imagine anything worse than Adam discovering her feelings for him. It sounded so foolish after everything that had happened in the past few days. She should really come clean, but what was the point now? Let Adam think what he liked. It would serve him better than the truth, after all.

“And Malcolm is with . . . Holden.”

“Ah, yes.” He nodded, looking exhausted.

Olive briefly fantasized about Holden texting Adam the equivalent of what Olive and Anh had been subjected to for the past two hours, and smiled. “How bad is it?”

“Bad?”

“This thing between Malcolm and Holden?”

“Ah.” Adam leaned his shoulder against the wall, folding his arms across his chest. “I think it can be very good. For Holden, at least. He really likes Malcolm.”

“Did he tell you?”

“He hasn’t shut up about it.” He rolled his eyes. “Did you know that Holden is secretly twelve?”

She laughed. “So is Malcolm. He dates a lot, and he’s usually good at managing expectations, but this thing with Holden—I had a sandwich for lunch and he randomly volunteered that Holden is allergic to peanuts. It wasn’t even PB and J!”

“He’s not allergic, he fakes it because he doesn’t like nuts.” He massaged his temple. “This morning I woke up to a haiku

about Malcolm's elbows. Holden had texted it at three a.m."

"Was it good?"

He lifted one eyebrow, and she laughed again.

"They are . . ."

"The worst." Adam shook his head. "But I think Holden might need it. Someone to care about, who also cares about him."

"Malcolm, too. I'm just . . . concerned that he might want more than Holden is willing to offer?"

"Believe me, Holden is very ready to file taxes jointly."

"Good. I'm glad." She smiled. And then felt her smile fade, just as quickly. "One-sided relationships are really . . . not good." *I would know. And maybe you would, too.*

He studied his own palm, undoubtedly thinking about the woman Holden had mentioned. "No. No, they're not."

It was a weird kind of ache, the jealousy. Confusing, unfamiliar, not something she was used to. Half cutting, half disorienting and aimless, so different from the loneliness she'd felt since she was fifteen. Olive missed her mother every day, but with time she'd been able to harness her pain and turn it into motivation for her work. Into purpose. Jealousy, though . . . the misery of it didn't come with any gain. Only restless thoughts, and something squeezing at her chest whenever her mind turned to Adam.

"I need to ask you something," he said. The seriousness of his tone made her look up.

"Sure."

"The people you overheard at the conference yesterday . . ."

She stiffened. "I'd rather not—"

“I won’t force you to do anything. But whoever they were, I want . . . I think you should consider filing a complaint.”

Oh God. *God*. Was this some cruel joke? “You really like complaints, don’t you?” She laughed once, a weak attempt at humor.

“I’m serious, Olive. And if you decide you want to do it, I’ll help you however I can. I could come with you and talk with SBD’s organizers, or we could go through Stanford’s Title IX office—”

“No. I . . . Adam, no. I’m not going to file a complaint.” She rubbed her eyes with the tips of her fingers, feeling as though this was one giant, painful prank. Except that Adam had no idea. He actually wanted to protect her, when all Olive wanted was . . . to protect him. “I’ve already decided. It would do more harm than good.”

“I know why you think that. I felt the same during grad school, with my mentor. We all did. But there *are* ways to do it. Whoever this person is, they—”

“Adam, I—” She ran one hand down her face. “I need you to drop this. Please.”

He studied her, silent for several minutes, and then nodded. “Okay. Of course.” He pushed away from the wall and straightened, clearly unhappy to let the subject go but making an effort to do so. “Would you like to go to dinner? There’s a Mexican restaurant nearby. Or sushi—*real* sushi. And a movie theater. Maybe there are one or two movies playing in which horses don’t die.”

“I’m not . . . I’m not hungry, actually.”

“Oh.” His expression was teasing. Gentle. “I didn’t know that was possible.”

“Me neither.” She chuckled weakly, and then forced herself to continue. “Today is September twenty-ninth.”

A beat. Adam studied her, patient and curious. “It is.”

She bit into her lower lip. “Do you know what the chair has decided about your funds?”

“Oh, right. The funds will be unfrozen.” He seemed happy, his eyes brilliant in an almost boyish way. It broke her heart a little. “I meant to tell you tonight at dinner.”

“That’s great.” She managed a smile, small and pitiful in her mounting anxiety. “That’s really great, Adam. I’m happy for you.”

“Must have been your sunscreen skills.”

“Yeah.” Her laugh sounded fake. “I’ll have to put them on my CV. Fake girlfriend with extensive experience. Microsoft Office and excellent sunscreen skills. Available immediately, only serious callers.”

“Not immediately.” He looked at her curiously. Tenderly. “Not for a while, I’d say.”

The weight, the one that had been pressing into her stomach since she’d realized what needed to be done, sank heavier. Now—this was it. The coda. The moment it all ended. Olive could do this, and she would, and things would be all the better for it.

“I think I should be.” She swallowed, and it was like acid down her throat. “Available.” She scanned his face, noticed his confusion, and clenched her fist in the hem of her sweater. “We gave ourselves a deadline, Adam. And we accomplished everything we wanted. Jeremy and Anh are solid—I doubt they even remember that Jeremy and I used to date. And your funds have been released, which is amazing. The truth is . . .”

Her eyes stung. She closed them tight, managing to push the tears back. Barely.

The truth, Adam, is that your friend, your collaborator, a person you clearly love and are close to, is horrid and despicable. He told me things that might be truths, or maybe lies—I don't know. I'm not sure. I'm not sure of anything anymore, and I would love to ask you, so badly. But I'm terrified that he might be right, and that you won't believe me. And I'm even more terrified that you will believe me, and that what I tell you will force you to give up something that is very important to you: your friendship and your work with him. I'm terrified of everything, as you can see. So, instead of telling you that truth, I will tell you another truth. A truth that, I think, will be best for you. A truth that will take me out of the equation, but will make its result better. Because I'm starting to wonder if this is what being in love is. Being okay with ripping yourself to shreds, so the other person can stay whole.

She inhaled deeply. "The truth is, we did great. And it's time we call it quits."

She could tell from how his lips parted, from his disoriented eyes searching hers, that he wasn't yet parsing what she'd said. "I don't think we'll need to explicitly tell anyone," she continued. "People won't see us together, and after a while they'll think that . . . that it didn't work out. That we broke up. And maybe you . . ." This was the hardest part. But he deserved to hear it. He'd told her the same, after all, when he'd believed her in love with Jeremy. "I wish you all the best, Adam. At Harvard, and . . . with your real girlfriend. Whoever you may choose. I cannot imagine anyone not reciprocating your feelings."

She could pinpoint the exact moment it dawned on him. She could tease apart the feelings struggling in his face—the surprise, the confusion, a hint of stubbornness, a split second of vulnerability that all melted in a blank, empty expression. Then she could see his throat work.

“Right,” he said. “Right.” He was staring at his shoes, absolutely motionless. Slowly accepting her words.

Olive took a step back and rocked on her heels. Outside, an iPhone rang, and a few seconds later someone burst into laughter. Normal noises, on a normal day. Normal, all of this.

“It’s for the best,” she said, because the silence between them—that, she just couldn’t stand. “It’s what we agreed on.”

“Whatever you want.” His voice was hoarse, and he seemed . . . absent. Retreated to some place inside himself. “Whatever you need.”

“I can’t thank you enough for everything you’ve done for me. Not just about Anh. When we met, I felt so alone, and . . .” For a moment she couldn’t continue. “Thank you for all the pumpkin spice, and for that Western blot, and for hiding your taxidermied squirrels when I visited, and . . .”

She couldn’t bring herself to go on anymore, not without choking on her words. The stinging in her eyes was burning now, threatening to spill over, so she nodded once, decisively, a period to this dangling sentence with no end in sight.

And that would have been it. It would have surely been the end. They would have left it at that, if Olive hadn’t passed him on her way to the door. If he hadn’t reached out and stopped her with a hand on her wrist. If he hadn’t immediately pulled that hand back and stared at it with an appalled expression, as if shocked that he’d dared to touch her without asking for permission first.

If he hadn’t said, “Olive. If you ever need anything, anything at all. *Anything*. Whenever. You can come to me.” His jaw worked, like there were other words, words he was keeping inside. “I *want* you to come to me.”

She almost didn’t register wiping wetness off her cheek with the back of her hand, or moving closer to him. It was his

scent that jolted her alert—soap and something dark, subtle but oh so familiar. Her brain had him mapped out, stored away across all senses. Eyes to his almost smile, hands to his skin, the smell of him in her nostrils. She didn't even need to think about what to do, just push up on her toes, press her fingers against his biceps, and kiss him gently on the cheek. His skin was soft and warm and a little prickly; unexpected, but not unwelcome.

An apt goodbye, she thought. Appropriate. Acceptable.

And so was his hand coming up to her lower back, pulling her into his body and stopping her from sliding back on her heels, or the way his head turned, until her lips were not brushing the skin of his cheek anymore. Her breath hitched, a chuff against the corner of his mouth, and for a few precious seconds she just savored it, the deep pleasure that ran through them both as they closed their eyes and let themselves just *be*, here, with each other.

Quiet. Still. One last moment.

Then Olive opened her mouth and turned her head, breathing against his lips, "Please."

Adam groaned deep in his chest. But she was the one who closed the space between them, who deepened the kiss, who combed her hands into his hair, short nails scraping against his scalp. She was the one who pulled him even closer, and he was the one who pushed her back against the wall and moaned into her mouth.

It was frightening. Frightening, how good this felt. How easy it would be to never stop. To let time stretch and unbend, forget about everything else, and simply stay in this moment forever.

But Adam pulled back first, holding her eyes as he tried to collect himself.

“It was good, wasn’t it?” Olive asked, with a small, wistful smile.

She wasn’t herself sure what she was referring to. Maybe his arms around her. Maybe this last kiss. Maybe everything else. The sunscreen, his ridiculous answers on his favorite color, the quiet conversations late at night . . . all of it had been so very good.

“It was.” Adam’s voice sounded too deep to be his own. When he pressed his lips against her forehead one last time, she felt her love for him swell fuller than a river in flood.

“I think I should leave,” she told him gently, without looking at him. He let her go wordlessly, so she did.

When she heard the click of the door closing behind her, it was like falling from a great height.

Chapter Nineteen

HYPOTHESIS: *When in doubt, asking a friend will save my ass.*

Olive spent the following day in the hotel, sleeping, crying, and doing the very thing that had gotten her into this mess to begin with: lying. She told Malcolm and Anh that she'd be busy with friends from college for the entire day, pulled the blackout curtains together, and then buried herself in her bed. Which, technically, was Adam's bed.

She didn't let herself think about the situation too much. Something inside her—her heart, very possibly—was broken in several large pieces, not shattered as much as neatly snapped in half, and then in half again. All she could do was sit down amid the debris of her feelings and wallow. Sleeping through most of the day helped dull the pain a great deal. Numb, she was rapidly starting to realize, was good.

She lied the day after, too. Feigned a last-minute request from Dr. Aslan when asked to join her friends at the conference or on excursions around Boston, and then took a deep, fortifying breath. She drew the curtains open, forced her blood to start flowing again (with fifty crunches, fifty jumping jacks, and fifty push-ups, though she cheated on the last by going on her knees), then showered and brushed her teeth for the first time in thirty-six hours.

It wasn't easy. Seeing Adam's Biology Ninja T-shirt in the mirror made her tear up, but she reminded herself that she'd made her choice. She'd decided to put Adam's well-being first, and she didn't regret it. But she'd be damned if she let

Tom Fucking Benton take credit for a project she had worked on for *years*. A project that meant the world to her. Maybe her life was nothing but a little sob story, but it was *her* little sob story.

Her heart may be broken, but her brain was doing just fine.

Adam had said that the reason most professors hadn't bothered to reply, perhaps even read her email, was that she was a student. So she followed his advice: she emailed Dr. Aslan and asked her to introduce Olive to all the researchers she'd previously contacted, plus the two people who'd been on her panel and had shown interest in her work. Dr. Aslan was close to retirement, and had more or less given up on producing science, but she was still a full professor at Stanford. It had to mean something.

Then Olive googled extensively about research ethics, plagiarism, and theft of ideas. The issue was a little murky, given that Olive had—quite recklessly, she now realized—described all her protocols in detail in her report for Tom. But once she began examining the situation with a clearer head, she decided that it wasn't as dire as she'd initially thought. The report she'd written, after all, was well-structured and thorough. With a few tweaks she could turn it into a scholarly publication. It would hopefully go quickly through peer review, and the findings would be credited under her name.

What she decided to focus on was that despite all his insults and rude comments, Tom, one of the top cancer researchers in the United States, had expressed interest in stealing her research ideas. She took it as a very, *very* backhanded compliment.

She spent the next several hours carefully avoiding thoughts of Adam and instead researching other potential scientists who might be able to support her the following year. It was a long shot, but she had to try. When someone knocked

on her door, it was already the middle of the afternoon, and she'd added three new names to her list. She quickly put on clothes to answer, expecting housekeeping. When Anh and Malcolm stormed inside, she cursed herself for never checking the peephole. She truly deserved to be axed by a serial killer.

"Okay," Anh said, throwing herself onto Olive's still-made bed, "you have two sentences to convince me that I shouldn't be mad at you for forgetting to ask how my outreach event went."

"Shit!" Olive covered her mouth with her hand. "I am so sorry. How did it go?"

"Perfect." Anh's eyes were shiny with happiness. "We had such great attendance and everyone loved it. We're thinking of making this a yearly thing, and formally establishing an organization. Peer-to-peer mentoring! Hear this: every grad is assigned *two* undergrads. Once they get into grad school, they mentor *two* more undergrads each. And in ten years we take over the entire damn world."

Olive looked at her, speechless. "This is . . . you're amazing."

"I am, aren't I? Okay, now's your turn to grovel. Aaand, go."

Olive opened her mouth, but for a long time nothing really came out. "I don't really have an excuse. I was just busy with . . . something Dr. Aslan asked me to finish."

"This is ridiculous. You are in Boston. You should be out there in an Irish pub pretending you love the Red Sox and eating Dunkies, not doing *work*. For your *boss*."

"We're technically here for a work conference," Olive pointed out.

"Conference shmonference." Malcolm joined Anh on the bed.

“Can we please go out, the three of us?” Anh begged. “Let’s do the Freedom Trail. With ice cream. And beer.”

“Where’s Jeremy?”

“Presenting his poster. And I’m bored.” Anh’s grin was impish.

Olive was not in the mood for socializing, or beer, or freedom trails, but at some point she was going to have to learn to productively navigate society with a broken heart.

She smiled and said, “Let me check my email, and then we can go.” She had, inexplicably, accumulated about fifteen messages in the thirty minutes since she’d last checked, only one of which wasn’t spam.

Today, 3:11 p.m.

FROM: Aysegul-Aslan@stanford.edu

TO: Olive-Smith@stanford.edu

SUBJECT: Reaching out to researchers for pancreatic cancer project

Olive,

I’d be happy to introduce you and ask scholars about opportunities for you in their labs. I agree that they might be more welcoming if the email comes from me. Send me your list, please.

BTW, you still haven’t sent the recording of your talk. I cannot wait to listen to it!

Warmly,

Aysegul Aslan, Ph.D.

Olive did some mental calculations to determine whether it was polite to send the list and not the recording (probably not), sighed, and started AirDropping the file to her laptop. When she realized that it was several hours long, because she’d forgotten to stop her phone after her talk, her sigh morphed into a groan. “This’ll take a while, guys. I have to send Dr. Aslan an audio file, and I’ll need to edit it beforehand.”

“Fine,” Anh huffed. “Malcolm, would you like to entertain us with tales of your date with Holden?”

“Okay, first, he wore the cutest baby-blue button-down.”

“Baby-blue?”

“Shut your mouth with that skeptical tone. Then he got me one flower.”

“Where did he get the flower?”

“Not sure.”

Olive poked around the MP3, trying to figure out where to cut the file. The ending was just minute after minute of silence, from when she’d left her phone in the hotel room. “Maybe he stole it from the buffet?” she said absentmindedly. “I think I saw pink carnations downstairs.”

“Was it a pink carnation?”

“Maybe.”

Anh cackled. “And they say romance is dead.”

“Shut up. Then, toward the beginning of the date, something happened. Something catastrophic that could only ever happen to *me*, given that my entire damn family is obsessed with science and, therefore, attends *all* the conferences. *All of them.*”

“No. Tell me you didn’t—”

“Yes. When we got to the restaurant, we found my mother, father, uncle, and grandfather. Who insisted on us joining them. Which means that my first date with Holden was a freaking *Thanksgiving dinner*.”

Olive looked up from her laptop and shared an appalled look with Anh. “How bad was it?”

“Funny that you ask, because it is with the utmost disconcert that I must say: it was fucking *spectacular*. They

loved him—because he's a badass scientist and because he is smoother than an organic smoothie—and in the span of two hours he somehow managed to help me convince my parents that my plan of being an industry scientist is bomb. I'm not kidding—this morning my mother called and was all about how I have grown as a person and am finally in control of my future and how my dating choices reflect that. She said that Dad agrees. Can you believe it? Anyway. After dinner we got ice cream and then we went back to Holden's hotel room and sixty-nined like the world was about to end—"

"A girl like you. Who figured out so early in her academic career that fucking well-known, successful scholars is how to get ahead. You fucked Adam, didn't you? We both know you're going to fuck me for the same reas—"

Olive slammed the spacebar, immediately stopping the replay of the recording. Her heart was pounding in her chest—first from confusion, then from the realization of what she'd inadvertently recorded, and finally from anger at hearing the words again. She brought a trembling hand to her lips, trying to purge Tom's voice from her head. She had spent two days trying to recover, and now—

"The hell was that?" Malcolm asked.

"Ol?" Anh's tentative voice reminded her that she was not alone in the room. She looked up and found that her friends had sat up. They were staring at her, wide-eyed with concern and shock.

Olive shook her head. She didn't want to—no, she didn't have the strength to explain. "Nothing. Just . . ."

"I recognize it," Anh said, coming to sit next to her. "I recognize the voice. From that talk we went to." She paused, searching Olive's eyes. "That was Tom Benton, wasn't it?"

"What the—" Malcolm stood. There was real alarm blooming in his voice. Anger, too. "Ol, why do you have a

recording of Tom Benton saying shit like that? What happened?"

Olive looked up at him, then at Anh, then at him again. They were studying her with worried, incredulous expressions. Anh must have taken Olive's hand at some point. She told herself that she needed to be strong, to be pragmatic, to be numb, but . . .

"I just . . ."

She tried. She really did try. But her face crumpled, and the last few days crashed and burned into her. Olive leaned forward, buried her head in Anh's lap, and let herself burst into tears.

OLIVE HAD NO intention of hearing Tom spout his poison again, so she gave her friends her headphones, went to the bathroom, and let the faucet run until they'd finished listening. It took less than ten minutes, but she sobbed throughout. When Malcolm and Anh came in, they sat next to her on the floor. Anh was crying, too, fat, angry drops sliding down her cheeks.

At least there's a bathtub we can flood, Olive thought while handing her the toilet paper roll she'd been hoarding.

"He's the most disgusting, detestable, shameful, disgraceful human being," Malcolm said. "I hope he has explosive diarrhea as we speak. I hope he gets genital warts. I hope he has to live saddled by the largest, most painful hemorrhoid in the universe. I hope he—"

Anh interrupted him. "Does Adam know?"

Olive shook her head.

“You need to tell him. And then the two of you need to report Benton’s ass and get him kicked out of academia.”

“No, I . . . I can’t.”

“Ol, listen to me. What Tom said is sexual harassment. There is no way Adam wouldn’t believe you—not to mention that you have a *recording*.”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“Of course it does!”

Olive wiped her cheeks with her palms. “If I tell Adam, he’s not going to want to collaborate with Tom anymore, and the project they’re working on is too important to him. Not to mention that he wants to move to Harvard next year, and—”

Anh snorted. “No, he doesn’t.”

“Yes. He told me that—”

“Ol, I’ve seen the way he looks at you. He’s head over feet. There is no way he’ll want to move to Boston if you’re not going—and I’m sure as hell not letting you go work for this dipshit . . . What?” Her eyes darted from Olive to Malcolm, who were exchanging a long glance. “Why are you guys looking at each other like that? And why are you making your inside-joke faces?”

Malcolm sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose. “Okay Anh, listen carefully. And before you ask—no, I’m not making this up. This is real life.” He took a deep breath before starting. “Carlsen and Olive never dated. They pretended so you’d believe that Olive wasn’t into Jeremy anymore—which she never was in the first place. Not sure what Carlsen was getting out of the arrangement, I forgot to ask. But halfway through the fake-dating Olive caught feelings for Carlsen, proceeded to lie to him about it, and pretended to be in love with someone else. But then . . .” He gave Olive a side glance. “Well. I didn’t want to be nosy, but judging from the fact that the other day

only one bed in this hotel room was unmade, I'm pretty sure there have been some . . . recent developments."

It was so painfully accurate, Olive had to bury her face in her knees. Just in time to hear Anh say, "This is not real life."

"It is."

"Nuh-uh. This is a Hallmark movie. Or a poorly written young adult novel. That will *not* sell well. Olive, tell Malcolm to keep his day job, he'll never make it as a writer."

Olive made herself look up, and Anh's frown was the deepest she'd ever seen. "It's true, Anh. I am so sorry I lied to you. I didn't want to, but—"

"You fake-dated Adam Carlsen?"

Olive nodded.

"God, I *knew* that kiss was weird."

She lifted her hands defensively. "Anh, I'm sorry—"

"You fake-dated *Adam. Fucking. Carlsen*?"

"It seemed like a good idea, and—"

"But I saw you kiss him! In the biology building parking lot!"

"Only because you forced me to—"

"But you sat on his lap!"

"Once again, *you* forced me to—not the coolest moment in our friendship, by the way—"

"But you put sunscreen on him! In front of at least one hundred people!"

"Only because *someone* put me up to it. Do you sense a pattern?"

Anh shook her head, as if suddenly appalled at her own actions. "I just—you guys looked so good together! It was so

obvious from the way Adam stared at you that he was *wild* about you. And the opposite—you looked at him like he was the only guy on earth and then—it always seemed like you were forcing yourself to hold back on him, and I wanted you to know that you could express your feelings if you wanted to—I really thought I was helping you, and—*you fake-dated Adam Carlsen*?"

Olive sighed. "Listen, I'm sorry I lied. Please, don't hate me, I—"

"I don't *hate* you."

Oh? "You . . . don't?"

"Of course not." Anh was indignant. "I low-key hate *myself* for forcing you to do all that stuff. Well, maybe not 'hate,' but I'd write myself a strongly worded email. And I'm incredibly flattered that you'd do something like that for me. I mean, it was misguided, and ridiculous, and needlessly convoluted, and you're a living, breathing, rom-com trope machine, and . . . God, Ol, you're such an idiot. But a very lovable idiot, and *my* idiot." She shook her head, incredulous, but squeezed her hand on Olive's knee and glanced at Malcolm. "Wait. Is your thing with Rodrigues real? Or are you two pretending to bone so a judge will give him custody of his recently orphaned godchildren?"

"Very real." Malcolm's smile was smug. "We fuck like bunnies."

"Fantastic. Well, Ol, we'll talk about this more. *A lot* more. We'll probably only talk about the greatest fake-dating event of the twenty-first century for millennia to come, but for now we should focus on Tom, and . . . it changes nothing, whether you and Adam are together. I still think he'd want to know. *I*'d want to know. Ol, if the situation were inverted, if you were the one who stood to lose something and Adam had been sexually harassed—"

“I haven’t.”

“Yes, Ol, you *have*.” Anh’s eyes were earnest, burning into hers, and it occurred to Olive then, the enormity of what had happened. Of what Tom had done.

She took a shuddering breath. “If the situation were inverted, I would want to know. But it’s different.”

“Why is it different?”

Because I’m in love with Adam. And he’s not in love with me. Olive massaged her temples, trying to think against the mounting headache. “I don’t want to take something he loves away from him. Adam respects and admires Tom, and I know Tom’s had Adam’s back in the past. Maybe he’s better off not knowing.”

“If only there were a way to find out what Adam would prefer,” Malcolm said.

Olive sniffled in response. “Yeah.”

“If only there were someone who knows Adam *very* well that we might ask,” Malcolm said, louder this time.

“Yeah,” Anh repeated, “that would be great. But there isn’t, so—”

“*If only* there were someone in this room who recently started dating Adam’s closest friend of nearly three decades,” Malcolm near-yelled, full of passive-aggressive indignity, and Anh and Olive exchanged a wide-eyed look.

“Holden!”

“You could ask Holden for advice!”

Malcolm huffed. “You two can be so smart and yet so slow.”

Olive suddenly recalled something. “Holden hates Tom.”

“Uh? Why does he hate him?”

“I don’t know.” She shrugged. “Adam wrote it off as some odd personality quirk of Holden’s, but—”

“Hey. My man’s personality is perfect.”

“Maybe there is something else?”

Anh nodded energetically. “Malcolm, where can Olive find Holden right this minute?”

“I don’t know. But”—he tapped his phone with a smug smile—“I happen to have his number right here.”

HOLDEN (OR HOLDEN BubbleButt, as Malcolm had saved him in his contacts) was just finishing up his talk. Olive caught the last five minutes of it—something about crystallography she neither understood nor wanted to—and was totally unsurprised by how smooth and charismatic a speaker he was. She approached him on the podium once he was done answering questions, and he smiled when he noticed her walk up the stairs, seeming genuinely happy to see her.

“Olive. My new roommate-in-law!”

“Right. Yes. Um, great talk.” She ordered herself to stop wringing her hands. “I wanted to ask you a question . . .”

“Is it about the nucleic acids in the fourth slide? Because I totally BS’d my way through them. My Ph.D. student made the figure, and she’s way smarter than me.”

“No. The question is about Adam—”

Holden’s expression brightened.

“Well, actually, it’s about Tom Benton.”

It darkened just as quickly. “What about Tom?”

Right. What about Tom, precisely? Olive wasn't quite sure how to approach the topic. She wasn't even sure what she meant to ask. Sure, she could have barfed up her entire life story for Holden and begged him to fix this mess for her, but somehow it didn't seem like a good idea. She racked her brain for a moment, and then landed on: "Did you know that Adam is thinking about moving to Boston?"

"Yeah." Holden rolled his eyes and pointed at the tall windows. There were large, ominous clouds threatening to explode with torrential rain. The wind, already chilly in September, was shaking a lonely hickory tree. "Who *wouldn't* want to move here from California?" he scoffed.

Olive liked the idea of seasons, but she kept the thought to herself. "Do you think . . . Do you think he'd be happy here?"

Holden studied her intensely for a minute. "You know, you were already my favorite girlfriend of Adam's—not that there were many; you're the only woman who could compete with computational modeling in about a decade—but that question wins you a lifelong number-one plaque." He pondered the matter for a minute. "I think Adam could be happy here—in his own way, of course. Broodingly, unenthusiastically happy. But yes, happy. Provided that you are here, too."

Olive had to stop herself from snorting.

"Provided that Tom behaves."

"Why do you say that? About Tom? I . . . I don't mean to pry, but you told me to watch my back with him in Stanford. You . . . don't like him?"

He sighed. "It's not that I don't like him—even though I don't. It's more that I don't trust him."

"Why, though? Adam told me about the things Tom did for him when your adviser was abusive."

“See, this is where a big part of my mistrust comes in.” Holden worried at his lower lip, as if deciding whether and how to continue. “Did Tom intercede to save Adam’s ass on numerous occasions? Sure. It’s undeniable. But how did those occasions come about to begin with? Our adviser was a piece of work, but he was not a micromanager. By the time we joined his lab, he was too busy being a famous asshole to know what was going on in day-to-day lab business. Which is why he had postdocs like Tom mentor grad students like Adam and me and de facto run the lab. And yet, he knew about every single minor screwup of Adam’s. Every few weeks he’d come in, tell Adam that he was a failure of a human being for minor stuff like switching reagents or dropping a beaker, and then Tom, our adviser’s most-trusted postdoc, would publicly intervene on behalf of Adam and save the day. The pattern was eerily specific, and only for Adam—who was by far the most promising student in our program. Destined for greatness and all that. Initially, it made me a bit suspicious that Tom was purposefully sabotaging Adam. But in recent years I’ve been wondering if what he wanted was something else altogether. . . .”

“Did you tell Adam?”

“Yes. But I had no proof, and Adam . . . well, you know him. He is stubbornly, unwaveringly loyal, and he was more than a little grateful to Tom.” He shrugged. “They ended up becoming bros, and they’ve been close friends ever since.”

“Did it bother you?”

“Not per se, no. I realize I might sound jealous of their friendship, but the truth is that Adam has always been too focused and single-minded to have many friends. I’d have been happy for him, truly. But Tom . . .”

Olive nodded. Yeah. *Tom*. “Why would he do this? This . . . weird vendetta against Adam?”

Holden sighed. “This is why Adam dismissed my concerns. There really isn’t an obvious reason. The truth is, I don’t think Tom hates Adam. Or at least, I don’t think it’s that simple. But I do believe that Tom is smart, and very, very cunning. That there probably is some jealousy involved, some desire to take advantage of Adam, to maybe control or have power over him. Adam tends to downplay his accomplishments, but he’s one of the best scientists of our generation. Having influence over him . . . that’s a privilege, and no small feat.”

“Yeah.” She nodded again. The question, the one she’d come here to ask, was starting to take shape in her mind. “Knowing all of this. Knowing how important Tom is to Adam, if you had proof of . . . of how Tom really is, would you show Adam?”

To his credit, Holden didn’t ask what the proof was, or proof of what. He scanned Olive’s face with an intent, thoughtful expression, and when he spoke, his words were careful.

“I can’t answer that for you. I don’t think I should.” He drummed his fingers on the podium, as if deep in thought. “But I do want to tell you three things. The first you probably already know: Adam is first and foremost a scientist. So am I, and so are you. And good science only happens when we draw conclusions based on all available evidence—not just the ones that are easy, or that confirm our hypotheses. Wouldn’t you agree?”

Olive nodded, and he continued.

“The second is something you may or may not be aware of, because it has to do with politics and academia, which are not easy to fully grasp until you find yourself sitting through five-hour-long faculty meetings every other week. But here’s the deal: the collaboration between Adam and Tom benefits Tom more than it does Adam. Which is why Adam is the main

investigator of the grant they were awarded. Tom is . . . well, replaceable. Don't get me wrong, he's a very good scientist, but most of his fame is due to him having been our former adviser's best and brightest. He inherited a lab that was an already well-oiled machine and kept it going. Adam created his own research line from the ground up, and . . . I think he tends to forget how good he is. Which is probably for the best, because he's already pretty insufferable." He huffed. "Can you imagine if he had a big ego, too?"

Olive laughed at that, and the sound came out oddly wet. When she raised her hands to her cheeks, she was not surprised to find them glistening. Apparently, weeping silently was her new baseline state.

"The last thing," Holden continued, unbothered by the waterworks, "is something you probably do not know." He paused. "Adam has been recruited by a lot of institutions in the past. *A lot*. He's been offered money, prestigious positions, unlimited access to facilities and equipment. That includes Harvard—this year was not their first attempt at bringing him in. But it's the first time he's *agreed* to interview. And he only agreed after you decided to go work in Tom's lab." He gave her a gentle smile, and then looked away, beginning to collect his things and slide them inside his backpack. "Make of that what you will, Olive."

Chapter Twenty

HYPOTHESIS: *People who cross me will come to regret it.*

She had to lie.

Again.

It was becoming a bit of a habit, and while she spun an elaborate tale for the secretary of Harvard's biology department, one in which she was a grad student of Dr. Carlsen's who needed to track him down immediately to relay a crucial message in person, she swore to herself that this would be the last time. It was too stressful. Too difficult. Not worth the strain on her cardiovascular and psychophysical health.

Plus, she sucked at it. The department secretary didn't look like she believed a word of what Olive said, but she must have decided that there was no harm in telling her where the biology faculty had taken Adam out for dinner—according to Yelp, a fancy restaurant that was less than a ten-minute Uber ride away. Olive looked down at her ripped jeans and lilac Converse and wondered if they'd let her in. Then she wondered if Adam would be mad. Then she wondered if she was making a mistake and screwing up her own life, Adam's life, her Uber driver's life. She was very tempted to change her destination to the conference hotel when the car pulled up to the curb, and the driver—Sarah Helen, according to the app—turned around with a smile. "Here we are."

"Thank you." Olive started getting out of the passenger seat and found that she couldn't move her legs.

“Are you okay?” Sarah Helen asked.

“Yeah. Just, un . . .”

“Are you gonna puke in my car?”

Olive shook her head. No. Yes. “Maybe?”

“Don’t, or I’ll destroy your rating.”

Olive nodded and tried to slide out of the seat. Her limbs were still nonresponsive.

Sarah Helen frowned. “Hey, what’s wrong?”

“I just . . .” There was a lump in her throat. “I need to do a thing. That I don’t want to do.”

Sarah Helen hummed. “Is it a work thing, or a love thing?”

“Uh . . . both.”

“Yikes.” Sarah Helen scrunched up her nose. “Double threat. Can you put it off?”

“No, not really.”

“Can you ask someone else to do it for you?”

“No.”

“Can you change your name, cauterize your fingertips, enter the witness protection program, and disappear?”

“Um, not sure. I’m not an American citizen, though.”

“Probably no, then. Can you say ‘fuck it’ and deal with the consequences?”

Olive closed her eyes and thought about it. What, exactly, would the consequences be if she didn’t do what she was planning to? Tom would be free to keep on being an absolute piece of shit, for one. And Adam would never know that he was being taken advantage of. He would move to Boston. And Olive would never have a chance to talk to him again, and all that he’d meant to her would end . . .

In a lie.

A lie, after a lot of lies. So many lies she'd told, so many true things she could have said but never did, all because she'd been too scared of the truth, of driving the people she loved away from her. All because she'd been afraid to lose them. All because she hadn't wanted to be alone again.

Well, the lying hadn't worked out too well. In fact, it had downright sucked lately. Time for plan B, then.

Time for some truth.

"No. I don't want to deal with the consequences."

Sarah Helen smiled. "Then, my friend, you better go do your thing." She pressed a button, and the passenger door unlocked with a clunk. "And you better give me a perfect rating. For the free psychotherapy."

This time, Olive managed to get out of the car. She tipped Sarah Helen 150 percent, took a deep breath, and made her way into the restaurant.

SHE FOUND ADAM immediately. He was big, after all, and the restaurant was not, which made for a pretty quick search. Not to mention that he was sitting with about ten people who looked a lot like very serious Harvard professors. And, of course, Tom.

Fuck my life, she thought, slipping past the busy hostess and walking toward Adam. She figured that her bright red duffle coat would attract his attention, then she'd gesticulate for him to check his phone, and text him to please, please, *please* give her five minutes of his time when dinner was over. She figured that telling him tonight was the best option—his interview would be over tomorrow, and he'd be able to make

his decision with the truth at his disposal. She figured her plan might work.

She had *not* figured that Adam would notice her while in conversation with a young, beautiful faculty member. She had *not* figured that he'd suddenly stop speaking, eyes widening and lips parting; that he'd mutter "Excuse me" while staring at Olive and stand from the table, ignoring the curious looks in his direction; that he'd march to the entrance, where Olive was, with quick, long strides and a concerned expression.

"Olive, are you okay?" he asked her, and—

Oh. His voice. And his eyes. And the way his hands came up, as if to touch her, to make sure that she was intact and really there—though right before his fingers could close around her biceps he hesitated and let them fall back to his sides.

It broke her heart a little.

"I'm fine." She attempted a smile. "I . . . I'm sorry to interrupt this. I know it's important, that you want to move to Boston, and—this is inappropriate. But it's now or never, and I wasn't sure if I'd have the courage to . . ." She was rambling. So she took a deep breath and started again. "I need to tell you something. Something that happened. With—"

"Hey, Olive."

Tom. But of course. "Hi, Tom." Olive held Adam's gaze and didn't look at him. He did not deserve to be looked at. "Can you give us a minute of privacy?"

She could see his oily, fake smile with the corner of her eye. "Olive, I know you're young and don't know how these things work, but Adam's here to interview for a very important position, and he can't just—"

"Leave," Adam ordered, voice low and cold.

Olive closed her eyes and nodded, taking a step back. Fine. It was fine. It was Adam's right not to talk to her. "Okay. I'm sorry, I—"

"Not you. Tom, leave us."

Oh. Oh. Well, then.

"Dude," Tom said, sounding amused, "you can't just get up from the table in the middle of an interview dinner and—"

"Leave," Adam repeated.

Tom laughed, brazen. "No. Not unless you're coming with me. We're collaborators, and if you act like an asshole during a dinner with my department because of some student you're screwing, it will reflect poorly on me. You need to come back to the table and—"

"A pretty girl like you should know the score by now. Don't lie to me and say you didn't pick out a dress that short for my benefit. Nice legs, by the way. I can see why Adam's wasting his time with you."

Neither Adam nor Tom had seen Olive take out her phone, or press Play. They both struggled for a second, confused—they'd clearly heard the words but were unsure where they came from. Until the recording restarted.

"Olive. You don't think I accepted you into my lab because you are good, do you? A girl like you. Who figured out so early in her academic career that fucking well-known, successful scholars is how to get ahead. You fucked Adam, didn't you? We both know you're going to fuck me for the same reason."

"What the—" Tom took a step forward, hand extended to grab the phone from Olive. He didn't get far, because Adam pushed him away with a palm on his chest, making him stumble several steps back.

He still wasn't looking at Tom. And not at Olive, either. He was staring down at her phone, something dark and dangerous and frighteningly still in his expression. She should have probably been scared. Maybe she was, a little.

"—*you're telling me you thought your pitiful abstract was selected for a talk because of its quality and scientific importance? Someone here has a very high opinion of herself, considering that her research is useless and derivative and that she can barely put together two words without stuttering like an idiot—"*

"It was him," Adam whispered. His voice was low, barely a whisper, deceptively calm. His eyes, unreadable. "It was Tom. The reason you were crying."

Olive could only nod. In the background, Tom's recorded voice droned on and on. Talking about how mediocre she was. How Adam would never believe her. Calling her names.

"This is ridiculous." Tom was coming closer again, reattempting to take the phone away. "I'm not sure what this bitch's problem is, but she's clearly—"

Adam exploded so fast, she didn't even see him move. One moment he stood in front of her, and the next he was pinning Tom against the wall.

"I'm going to kill you," he gritted out, little more than a growl. "If you say another word about the woman I love, if you look at her, if you even *think* about her—I'm going to *fucking* kill you."

"Adam—" Tom choked out.

"Actually, I will kill you anyway."

People were running toward them. The hostess, a waiter, a few faculty members from Adam's table. They were forming a crowd, yelling in confusion and trying to pull Adam off Tom —with no success. Olive's mind went to Adam pushing

Cherie's truck, and she almost laughed in a moment of hysteria. Almost.

"Adam," she called. Her voice was barely audible in the chaos going on around them, but it was what got through to him. He turned to look at her, and there were entire worlds in his eyes. "Adam, don't," she whispered. "He's not worth it."

Just like that, Adam took a step back and let Tom go. An elderly gentleman—probably a Harvard dean—began laying into him, asking for explanations, telling him how unacceptable his behavior was. Adam ignored him, and everyone else. He headed straight for Olive, and—

He cradled her head with both hands, fingers sliding through her hair and holding her tight as he lowered his forehead to hers. He was warm, and smelled like himself, like *safe* and *home*. His thumbs swept through the mess of tears on her cheeks. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I didn't know, and I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry—"

"It's not your fault," she managed to mumble, but he didn't seem to hear her.

"I'm sorry. I'm—"

"Dr. Carlsen," a male voice boomed loudly from behind them, and she felt Adam's body stiffen against hers. "I demand an explanation."

Adam paid no heed to the man, and kept holding Olive.

"*Dr. Carlsen*," he repeated, "this is *unacceptable*—"

"Adam," Olive whispered. "You have to answer him."

Adam exhaled. Then he pressed a long, lingering kiss to Olive's forehead before reluctantly disentangling himself. When she was finally able to get a good look at him, he seemed more like his usual self.

Calm. Angry at the entire world. In charge.

“Send me that recording immediately,” he murmured at her. She nodded, and he turned to the elderly man who’d just approached them. “We need to talk. Privately. Your office?” The other man looked shocked and offended, but he nodded stiffly. Behind him, Tom was making a fuss, and Adam clenched his jaw. “Keep him away from me.” He turned to Olive before leaving, bending closer to her and lowering his voice. His palm was warm against her elbow.

“I am going to take care of this,” he told her. There was something determined, earnest in his eyes. Olive had never felt safer, or more loved. “And then I’ll come find you, and I’ll take care of you.”

Chapter Twenty-One

HYPOTHESIS: *Wearing expired contact lenses will cause bacterial and/or fungal infections that will have repercussions for years to come.*

"Holden sent a message for you."

Olive looked away from the window and to Malcolm, who'd turned off airplane mode the second they'd landed in Charlotte for their layover. "Holden?"

"Yeah. Well, it's technically from Carlsen."

Her heart skipped a beat.

"He lost his phone charger and can't text you, but he and Holden are on their way back to SFO."

"Ah." She nodded, feeling a small rush of relief. That explained Adam's silence. He hadn't been in touch since last night. She'd worried that he'd been arrested and was pondering emptying her savings account to help cover his bail. All twelve dollars and sixteen cents. "Where's their layover?"

"No layover." Malcolm rolled his eyes. "Direct flight. They'll be at SFO ten minutes after us, even though they're only now leaving Boston. Eat the rich."

"Did Holden say anything about . . ."

Malcolm shook his head. "Their plane is about to leave, but we can wait for them at SFO. I'm sure Adam will have some updates for you."

"You just want to make out with Holden, don't you?"

Malcolm smiled and leaned his head against her shoulder. “My kalamata knows me well.”

It seemed impossible that she’d been gone for less than a week. That all the chaos had unfolded in the span of a few days. Olive felt dazed, shell-shocked, as though her brain was winded from running a marathon. She was tired and wanted to sleep. She was hungry and wanted to eat. She was angry and wanted to see Tom get what he deserved. She was anxious, as twitchy as a damaged nerve, and she wanted a hug. Preferably from Adam.

In San Francisco, she folded her now-useless coat inside her suitcase and then sat on it. She checked her phone for new messages while Malcolm went to buy a bottle of Diet Coke. There were several from Anh, just checking in from Boston, and one from her landlord about the elevator being out of commission. She rolled her eyes, switched to her academic email, and found several unread messages flagged as important.

She tapped on the red exclamation point and opened one.

Today, 5:15 p.m.

FROM: Anna-Wiley@berkeley.edu

TO: Aysegul-Aslan@stanford.edu

CC: Olive-Smith@stanford.edu

SUBJECT: Re: Pancreatic Cancer Project

Aysegul,

Thank you for reaching out to me. I had the privilege of seeing Olive Smith’s talk at SBD—we were on the same panel—and I was very impressed with her work on early detection tools for pancreatic cancer. I’d love to have her in my lab next year! Maybe the three of us can chat more on the phone soon?

Best,

Anna

Olive gasped. She covered her mouth with her hand, and immediately opened another email.

Today, 3:19 p.m.

FROM: Robert-Gordon@umn.edu

TO: Aysegul-Aslan@stanford.edu, Olive-Smith@stanford.edu

SUBJECT: Pancreatic Cancer Project

Dr. Aslan, Ms. Smith,

Your work on pancreatic cancer is fascinating, and I would welcome the opportunity for a collaboration. We should set up a Zoom meeting.

-R

There were two more emails. *Four total* from cancer researchers, all following up on Dr. Aslan's introductory message and saying they'd love having Olive in their labs. She felt a surge of happiness so violent, it almost made her dizzy.

"Ol, look who I ran into."

Olive shot up to her feet. Malcolm was there, holding Holden's hand, and barely a step behind them—

Adam. Looking tired, and handsome, and as large in real life as he'd been in her mind for the past twenty-four hours. Looking straight at her. Olive recalled the words he'd said last night in the restaurant and felt her cheeks heat, her chest constrict, her heart beat out of her skin.

"Hear me out," Holden started without even saying hi, "the four of us: double date. Tonight."

Adam ignored him and came to stand next Olive. "How are you?" he asked in a low tone.

"Good." For the first time in days, it wasn't even a lie. Adam was here. And all those emails were in her inbox. "You?"

“Good,” he replied with a half smile, and she had a weird feeling that much like her, he wasn’t lying. Her heart picked up even more.

“What about Chinese?” Holden interjected. “Everyone like Chinese here?”

“I’m cool with Chinese,” Malcolm muttered, though he didn’t seem enthusiastic at the idea of a double date. Likely because he didn’t want to sit across from Adam for an entire meal and relive the trauma of his graduate advisory committee meetings.

“Olive?”

“Um . . . I like Chinese.”

“Perfect. So does Adam, so—”

“I’m not having dinner out,” Adam said.

Holden frowned. “Why?”

“I have better things to do.”

“Like what? Olive’s coming, too.”

“Leave Olive alone. She’s tired, and we’re busy.”

“I have access to your Google Calendar, asshole. You’re not busy. If you don’t want to hang out with me, you can just be honest.”

“I don’t want to hang out with you.”

“You little shit. After the week we just had. And on my *birthday*.”

Adam recoiled slightly. “What? It’s not your birthday.”

“Yes, it is.”

“Your birthday is April tenth.”

“Is it, though?”

Adam closed his eyes, scratching his forehead. “Holden, we’ve talked daily for the past twenty-five years, and I have been to at least five Power Rangers–themed birthday parties of yours. The last one was when you turned seventeen.”

Malcolm attempted to cover his laugh with a cough.

“I know when your birthday is.”

“You always had it wrong, I was just too nice to tell you.” He clasped Adam’s shoulder. “So, Chinese to celebrate the blessing of my birth?”

“Why not Thai?” Malcolm interjected, addressing Holden and ignoring Adam.

Holden made a whiny noise and started saying something about the lack of good larb in Stanford, something Olive would have normally been interested in hearing, except that—

Adam was looking at her again. From several inches above Holden’s and Malcolm’s heads, Adam was looking at her with an expression that was half apologetic, half annoyed, and . . . all intimate, really. Something familiar they’d shared before. Olive felt something inside her melt and suppressed a smile.

Suddenly, dinner seemed like a great idea.

It will be fun, she mouthed at him while Holden and Malcolm were busy arguing about whether they should just try that new burger place.

It will be excruciating, he mouthed back barely parting his lips, looking resigned and put-upon and just so amazingly *Adam* that Olive couldn’t help but burst into laughter.

Holden and Malcolm stopped arguing and turned to her. “What?”

“Nothing,” Olive said. The corner of Adam’s mouth was curling up, too.

“Why are you laughing, Ol?”

She opened her mouth to deflect, but Adam beat her to it.

"Fine. We'll go." He said "we" like he and Olive were a "we," like it had never been fake after all, and her breath caught in her throat. "But I'm excused from any birthday-related outings for the next year. Actually, make it the next two. And veto on the new burger place."

Holden fist-pumped, and then frowned. "Why veto on burgers?"

"Because," he said, holding Olive's eyes, "burgers taste like foot."

"WE SHOULD START by addressing the obvious," Holden said, chewing on the complimentary appetizers, and Olive tensed in her seat. She wasn't sure she wanted to discuss the Tom situation with Malcolm and Holden before talking about it with Adam alone.

As it turned out, she shouldn't have worried.

"Which is that Malcolm and Adam hate each other."

Next to her in the booth, Adam frowned in confusion. Malcolm, who was sitting across from Olive, covered his face with his palms and groaned.

"I am reliably informed," Holden continued, undeterred, "that Adam called Malcolm's experiments 'sloppy' and 'a misuse of research funds' during a committee meeting, and that Malcolm took offense to that. Now, Adam, I've been telling Malcolm that you were probably just having a bad day —maybe one of your grads had split an infinitive in an email, or your arugula salad wasn't organic enough. Do you have anything to say for yourself?"

“Uh . . .” Adam’s frown deepened, and so did Malcolm’s facepalm. Holden waited pointedly for an answer, and Olive watched it all unfold, wondering if she should take out her phone and film this car crash. “I have no recollection of that committee meeting. Though it does sound like something I would say.”

“Great. Now tell Malcolm it wasn’t personal, so we can move on and have fried rice.”

“Oh my God,” Malcolm muttered. “Holden, please.”

“I’m not having fried rice,” Adam said.

“You can have raw bamboo while the normal people have fried rice. But as of right now, my boyfriend thinks that his BFF’s boyfriend and my own BFF has it out for him, and it’s cramping my double-dating style, so please.”

Adam blinked slowly. “BFF?”

“Adam.” Holden pointed at a grimacing Malcolm with his thumb. “Now, please.”

Adam sighed heavily, but he turned to Malcolm. “Whatever I said or did, it was not personal. I’ve been told that I can be needlessly antagonistic. And unapproachable.”

Olive didn’t get to see Malcolm’s reaction. Because she was busy studying Adam and the slight curl on his lips, the one that became an almost smile when he looked at Olive and met her eyes. For a second, the brief second she held his gaze before he looked away, it was just the two of them. And this sort-of-past they shared, their stupid inside jokes, the way they’d teased each other in the late-summer sunlight.

“Perfect.” Holden clapped his hands, intrusively loud. “Egg rolls for appetizer, yes?”

It was a good idea, this dinner. This night, this table, this moment. Sitting next to Adam, smelling the petrichor,

watching the dark splotches on the gray cotton of his Henley from the storm that had started just as they'd slipped inside the restaurant. They would have to talk, later, have a serious conversation about Tom and many other things. But for now it was the way it had always been between Adam and her: like slipping into a favorite dress, one she'd thought lost inside her closet, and finding that it fit as comfortably as it used to.

"I want egg rolls." She glanced at Adam. His hair was starting to get long again, so she did what felt natural: reached out and flattened his cowlick. "I'm going to take a wild guess and assume that you hate egg rolls, just like everything else that's good in the world."

He mouthed *smart-ass* right as the waiter brought their waters and set the menus on the table. Three menus, to be precise. Holden and Malcolm each took one, and Olive and Adam exchanged a loaded, amused look and grabbed the remaining one to share. It worked perfectly: he angled it so that the veggie section was on his side and all manner of fried entrées were on hers. It was serendipitous enough that she let out a laugh.

Adam tapped his index finger on the drink section. "Look at this abomination," he murmured. His lips were close to her ear—a chuff of hot air, intimate and pleasant in the blasting AC.

She grinned. "No way."

"Appalling."

"Amazing, you mean."

"I do not."

"This is my new favorite restaurant."

"You haven't even tried it yet."

"It will be spectacular."

“It will be horrific—”

A throat cleared, reminding them that they were not alone. Malcolm and Holden were both staring—Malcolm with a shrewd, suspicious expression, and Holden with a knowing smile. “What’s all that about?”

“Oh.” Olive’s cheeks warmed a little. “Nothing. They just have pumpkin spice bubble tea.”

Malcolm pretended to gag. “Ugh, Ol. *Gross*.”

“Shut up.”

“It sounds great.” Holden smiled and leaned into Malcolm. “We should get one to split.”

“Excuse me?”

Olive tried not to laugh at Malcolm’s horrified expression. “Don’t get Malcolm started on pumpkin spice,” she told Holden in an exaggerated whisper.

“Oh, shit.” Holden clutched his chest in mock terror.

“This is a serious matter.” Malcolm let his menu fall on the table. “Pumpkin spice is Satan’s dandruff, harbinger of the apocalypse, and it tastes like ass—not in the good way.” Next to Olive Adam nodded slowly, highly impressed with Malcolm’s rant. “One pumpkin spice latte contains the same amount of sugar you’d find in fifty Skittles—and *no pumpkin whatsoever*. Look it up.”

Adam stared at Malcolm with something very similar to admiration. Holden met Olive’s eyes and told her conspiratorially, “Our boyfriends have so much in common.”

“They do. They think hating entire harmless families of food is a personality trait.”

“Pumpkin spice is not harmless. It’s a radioactive, overpowering sugar bomb that worms its way into every sort of product and is single-handedly responsible for the

extinction of the Caribbean monk seal. And you”—he pointed his finger at Holden—“are on thin ice.”

“What—why?”

“I can’t date someone who doesn’t respect my stance on pumpkin spice.”

“To be fair it’s not a very respectable stance—” Holden noticed Malcolm’s glare and lifted his hands defensively. “I had no idea, babe.”

“You should have.”

Adam clucked his tongue, amused. “Yes, Holden. Do better.” He leaned back in his seat, and his shoulder brushed against Olive’s. Holden gave him the finger.

“Adam knows and respects Olive’s stance on hamburgers, and they’re not even—” Whatever Malcolm had been about to say, he had the sense to stop himself. “Well, if Adam knows, you should know about the pumpkin spice.”

“Wasn’t Adam a dick until, like, twelve seconds ago?”

“How the turntables,” Adam murmured. Olive reached out to pinch him on the side, but he stopped her with a hand around her wrist.

Evil, she mouthed at him. He just smiled, evilly, studying Malcolm and Holden a little too gleefully.

“Come on. It’s not even comparable,” Holden was saying. “Olive and Adam have been together for years. We met less than a week ago.”

“They have not,” Malcolm corrected him, wagging a finger. Adam’s hand was still curled around her wrist. “They started dating, like, a month before we did.”

“No,” Holden insisted. “Adam was into her for ages. He probably secretly studied her eating habits and compiled

seventeen databases and built machine-learning algorithms to predict her culinary preferences—"

Olive burst into laughter. "He did not." She took a sip of water, still smiling. "We only just started hanging out. At the beginning of the fall semester."

"Yes, but you knew each other from earlier." Holden was frowning. "You two met the year before you started your Ph.D. here, when you came for your interview, and he's been pining after you ever since."

Olive shook her head and laughed, turning to Adam to share her amusement. Except that Adam was staring at her already, and he did not look amused. He looked . . . something else. Worried maybe, or apologetic, or resigned. Panicky? And just like that, the restaurant was silent. The pitter-patter of rain on the windows, people's chatter, the clinking of silverware—it all receded; the floor tilted, shook a little, and the AC was just this side of too cold. At some point, Adam's fingers had let go of her wrist.

Olive thought back to the bathroom incident. To burning eyes and wet cheeks, the smell of reagent and clean, male skin. The blur of a large, dark figure standing in front of her with his deep, reassuring, amused voice. The panic of being twenty-three and alone and having no idea what she should be doing, where she should be going, what the right choice was.

Is mine a good enough reason to go to grad school?

It's the best one.

All of a sudden, things had seemed simple enough.

It had been Adam, after all. Olive had been right.

What she hadn't been right about was whether *he* remembered her.

“Yes,” she said. She wasn’t smiling anymore. Adam was still holding her gaze. “I guess he has.”

Chapter Twenty-Two

HYPOTHESIS: *When given a choice between A (telling a lie) and B (telling the truth), I will inevitably end up selecting . . .*

No. Not this time.

Olive had no doubt that Holden's tales were highly embellished and the result of years of comedy workshopping, but she still couldn't help laughing harder than ever before.

"And I'm awakened by this waterfall pouring down on me __"

Adam rolled his eyes. "It was a drop."

"And I'm asking myself why it's raining inside the cabin, when I realize that it's coming from the top bunk and that Adam, who was, like, thirteen at the time—"

"Six. I was six, and you were seven."

"Had pissed the bed, and the piss was seeping through the mattress and onto me."

Olive's hands flew up to cover her mouth, not quite succeeding at hiding her amusement—just like she'd failed when Holden had recounted that a dalmatian puppy had once bitten Adam's ass through his jeans, or that he'd been voted "Most likely to make people cry" in his senior yearbook.

At least Adam didn't act embarrassed, and not nearly as upset as he'd seemed after Holden had talked about him pining after her. Which explained . . . so many things.

Everything, maybe.

“Man. Six years old.” Malcolm shook his head and wiped his eyes.

“I was sick.”

“Still. Seems kind of old to have an accident?”

Adam simply stared at Malcolm until he lowered his gaze. “Uh, maybe not that old after all,” he muttered.

There was a large bowl of fortune cookies by the register. Olive noticed it on her way out of the restaurant, let out a delighted squeal, and dipped her hand in to fish out four plastic packages. She handed one each to Malcolm and Holden, and held out another for Adam with a mischievous smile. “You hate these, don’t you?”

“I don’t.” He accepted the cookie. “I just think they taste like Styrofoam.”

“Probably have similar nutritional values, too,” Malcolm muttered as they slipped out into the chilly humidity of the early night. Surprisingly, he and Adam were finding lots of common ground.

It wasn’t raining anymore, but the street was shiny in the light under a lamppost; a soft breeze made the leaves rustle and stray drops of water scatter to the ground. The air was fresh in Olive’s lungs, pleasantly so after the hours spent in the restaurant. She unrolled her sleeves, accidentally brushing her hand against Adam’s abs. She smiled up at him, playfully apologetic; he flushed and averted his eyes.

“ ‘He who laughs at himself never runs out of things to laugh at.’ ” Holden popped a bit of fortune cookie in his mouth, blinking at the message inside. “Is that shade?” He looked around, indignant. “Did this fortune cookie just throw shade at me?”

“Sounds like it,” Malcolm answered. “Mine says ‘Why not treat yourself to a good time instead of waiting for somebody

else to do it?' I think my cookie just shaded you, too, babe."

"What's wrong with this batch?" Holden pointed at Adam and Olive. "What do yours say?"

Olive was already opening hers, nibbling on a corner as she pulled the paper out. It was very banal, and yet her heart skipped beat. "Mine's normal," she informed Holden.

"You're lying."

"Nope."

"What does it say?"

" 'It's never too late to tell the truth.' " She shrugged, and turned to throw away the plastic wrapper. At the last moment, she decided to keep the strip of paper and slip it inside her jeans' back pocket.

"Adam, open yours."

"Nah."

"Come on."

"I'm not going to eat a piece of cardboard because it hurt your feelings."

"You're a shit friend."

"According to the fortune cookie industry, you're a shit boyfriend, so—"

"Give it here," Olive interjected, plucking the cookie out of Adam's hand. "I'll eat it. And read it."

The parking lot was completely empty, save for Adam's and Malcolm's cars. Holden had ridden from the airport with Adam, but he and Malcolm were planning to spend the night at Holden's apartment to walk Fleming, his dog.

"Adam's giving you a ride, right, Ol?"

"No need. It's less than a ten-minute walk home."

“But what about your suitcase?”

“It’s not heavy, and I—” She stopped abruptly, worried her lip for a second while she contemplated the possibilities, and then felt herself smile, at once tentative and purposeful. “Actually, Adam will walk me home. Right?”

He was silent and inscrutable for a moment. Then he calmly said, “Of course,” slipped his keys in the pocket of his jeans, and slid the strap of Olive’s duffel bag over his shoulder.

“Where do you live?” he asked when Holden was not within earshot anymore.

She pointed silently. “You sure you want to carry my bag? I heard it’s easy to throw out your back, once you reach a certain age.”

He glared at her, and Olive laughed, falling into step with him as they headed out of the parking lot. The street was silent, except for the soles of her Converse catching on the wet concrete and Malcolm’s car passing them by a few seconds later.

“Hey,” Holden asked from the passenger window. “What did Adam’s fortune cookie say?”

“Mmm.” Olive made a show to look at the strip. “Not much. Just ‘Holden Rodrigues, Ph.D., is a loser.’ ” Malcolm sped up just as Holden flipped her off, making her burst into laughter.

“What does it really say?” Adam asked when they were finally alone.

Olive handed him the crumpled paper and remained silent as he angled it to read it in the lamplight. She wasn’t surprised when she saw a muscle jump in his jaw, or when he slid the fortune into the pocket of his jeans. She knew what it said, after all.

You can fall in love: someone will catch you.

"Can we talk about Tom?" she asked, sidestepping a puddle. "We don't have to, but if we can . . ."

"We can. We should." She saw his throat work. "Harvard's going to fire him, of course. Other disciplinary measures are still being decided—there were meetings until very late last night." He gave her a quick glance. "That's why I didn't call you earlier. Harvard's Title IX coordinator should be in touch with you soon."

Good. "What about your grant?"

His jaw clenched. "I'm not sure. I'll figure something out—or not. I don't particularly care at the moment."

It surprised her. And then it didn't, not when she considered that the professional implications of Tom's betrayal couldn't have cut as deeply as the personal ones. "I'm sorry, Adam. I know he was your friend—"

"He wasn't." Adam abruptly stopped in the middle of the street. He turned to her, his eyes a clear, deep brown. "I had no idea, Olive. I thought I knew him, but . . ." His Adam's apple bobbed. "I should never have trusted him with you. I'm sorry."

He said it—"with you"—like Olive was something special, uniquely precious to him. His most beloved treasure. It made her want to shiver, and laugh, and weep at the same time. It made her happy and confused.

"I was . . . I was afraid you might be mad at me. For ruining things. Your relationship with Tom, and maybe . . . maybe you won't be able to move to Boston anymore."

He shook his head. "I don't care. I couldn't care less about any of it." He held her eyes for a long moment, his mouth working as though he was swallowing the rest of his words. But he never continued, so Olive nodded and turned around, starting to walk again.

“I think I’ve found another lab. To finish my study. Closer, so I won’t have to move next year.” She pushed her hair behind her ear and smiled at him. There was something intrinsically enjoyable in having him next to her, so physical and undeniable. She felt it on some primal, visceral level, the giddy happiness that always came with his presence. Suddenly, Tom was the last thing she wanted to discuss with Adam. “Dinner was nice. And you were right, by the way.”

“About the pumpkin sludge?”

“No, that was *amazing*. About Holden. He really is insufferable.”

“He grows on you, after a decade or so.”

“Does he?”

“Nah. Not really.”

“Poor Holden.” She huffed out a small laugh. “You weren’t the only one who remembered, by the way.”

He glanced at her. “Remembered what?”

“Our meeting. The one in the bathroom, when I came to interview.”

Olive thought that maybe his step faltered for a split second. Or maybe it didn’t. Still, there was a tinge of uncertainty in the deep breath he took.

“Did you really?”

“Yup. It just took me a while to realize that it was you. Why didn’t you say anything?” She was so curious about what had been going on in Adam’s head in the past few days, weeks, years. She was starting to imagine quite a bit, but some things . . . some things he’d have to clear up for her.

“Because you introduced yourself like we’d never met before.” She thought maybe he was flushing a little. Maybe not. Maybe it was impossible to tell, in the starless sky and the

faint yellow lights. “And I’d been . . . I’d been thinking about you. For years. And I didn’t want to . . .”

She could only imagine. They’d passed each other in the hallways, been at countless department research symposiums and seminars together. She hadn’t thought anything of it, but now . . . now she wondered what *he* had thought.

He’d been going on and on about this amazing girl *for years, but he was concerned about being in the same department*, Holden had said.

And Olive had assumed so much. She had been so wrong.

“You didn’t need to lie, you know,” she said, not accusing.

He adjusted the strap of her suitcase on his shoulder. “I didn’t.”

“You sort of did. By omission.”

“True. Are you . . .” He pressed his lips together. “Are you upset?”

“No, not really. It’s really not that bad a lie.”

“It’s not?”

She nibbled on her thumbnail for a moment. “I’ve said much worse, myself. And I didn’t bring up our meeting, either, even after I made the connection.”

“Still, if you feel—”

“I’m not upset,” she said, gentle but final. She looked up at him, willing him to understand. Trying to figure out how to tell him. How to *show* him. “I am . . . other things.” She smiled. “Glad, for instance. That you remembered me, from that day.”

“You . . .” A pause. “You are very memorable.”

“Ha. I’m not, really. I was no one—part of a huge incoming cohort.” She snorted and looked down to her feet.

Her steps had to be much quicker than his to keep up with his longer legs. “I hated my first year. It was so stressful.”

He glanced at her, surprised. “Do you remember your first seminar talk?”

“I do. Why?”

“Your elevator pitch—you called it a turbolift pitch. You put a picture from *The Next Generation* on your slides.”

“Oh, yes. I did.” She let out a low laugh. “I didn’t know you were a Trekkie.”

“I had a phase. And that year’s picnic, when we got rained on. You were playing freeze tag with someone’s kids for hours. They loved you—they had to physically peel the youngest off you to get him inside the car.”

“Dr. Moss’s kids.” She looked at him curiously. A light breeze rose and ruffled his hair, but he didn’t seem to mind. “I didn’t think you liked kids. The opposite, actually.”

He lifted one eyebrow. “I don’t like twenty-five-year-olds who act like toddlers. I don’t mind them if they’re actually three.”

Olive smiled. “Adam, the fact that you knew who I was . . . Did it have anything to do with your decision to pretend to date me?”

About a dozen expressions crossed his face as he looked for an answer, and she couldn’t pick apart a single one. “I wanted to help you, Olive.”

“I know. I believe that.” She rubbed her fingers against her mouth. “But was that all?”

He pressed his lips together. Exhaled. Closed his eyes, and for a split second looked like he was having his teeth and his soul pulled out. Then he said, resigned, “No.”

“No,” she repeated, pensive. “This is my place, by the way.” She pointed at the tall brick building on the corner.

“Right.” Adam looked around, studying her street. “Should I carry your bag upstairs?”

“I . . . Maybe later. There is something I need to tell you. Before.”

“Of course.”

He stopped in front of her, and she looked up at him, at the lines of his handsome, familiar face. There was only fresh breeze between them, and whatever distance Adam had seen fit to keep. Her stubborn, mercurial fake boyfriend. Wonderfully, perfectly unique. Delightfully one of a kind. Olive felt her heart overflow.

She took a deep breath. “The thing is, Adam . . . I was stupid. And wrong.” She played nervously with a lock of her hair, then let her hand drift down to her stomach, and—okay. Okay. She was going to tell him. She would do this. Now. “It’s like—it’s like statistical hypothesis testing. Type I error. It’s scary, isn’t it?”

He frowned. She could tell he had no idea where she was going with this. “Type I error?”

“A false positive. Thinking that something is happening when it’s not.”

“I know what type I error is—”

“Yes, of course. It’s just . . . in the past few weeks, what terrified me was the idea that I could misread a situation. That I could convince myself of something that wasn’t true. See something that wasn’t there just because I wanted to see it. A scientist’s worst nightmare, right?”

“Right.” His brows furrowed. “That is why in your analyses you set a level of significance that is—”

“But the thing is, type II error is bad, too.”

Her eyes bore into his, hesitant and urgent all at once. She was frightened—so frightened by what she was about to say. But also exhilarated for him to finally know. Determined to get it out.

“Yes,” he agreed slowly, confused. “False negatives are bad, too.”

“That’s the thing with science. We’re drilled to believe that false positives are bad, but false negatives are just as terrifying.” She swallowed. “Not being able to see something, even if it’s in front of your eyes. Purposefully making yourself blind, just because you’re afraid of seeing too much.”

“Are you saying that statistics graduate education is inadequate?”

She exhaled a laugh, suddenly flushed, even in the dark cool of the night. Her eyes were starting to sting. “Maybe. But also . . . I think that *I* have been inadequate. And I don’t want to be, not anymore.”

“Olive.” He took one step closer, just a few inches. Not enough to crowd, but plenty for her to feel his warmth. “Are you okay?”

“There have been . . . so many things that have happened, before I even met you, and I think they messed me up a little. I’ve mostly lived in fear of being alone, and . . . I’ll tell you about them, if you want. First, I have to figure it out on my own, why shielding myself with a bunch of lies seemed like a better idea than admitting even one ounce of truth. But I think . . .”

She took a deep, shuddering breath. There was a tear, one single tear that she could feel sliding down her cheek. Adam saw it and mouthed her name.

“I think that somewhere along the way I forgot that I was something. I forgot myself.”

She was the one who stepped closer. The one who put her hand on the hem of his shirt, who tugged gently and held on to it, who started touching him and crying and smiling at the same time. “There are two things I want to tell you, Adam.”

“What can I—”

“Please. Just let me tell you.”

He wasn’t very good at it. At standing there and doing nothing while her eyes welled fuller and fuller. She could tell that he felt useless, his hands dangling in fists at his sides, and she . . . she loved him even more for it. For looking at her like she was the beginning and end of his every thought.

“The first thing is that I lied to you. And my lie was not just by omission.”

“Olive—”

“It was a real lie. A bad one. A stupid one. I let you—no, I *made* you think that I had feelings for someone else, when in truth . . . I didn’t. I never did.”

His hand came up to cup the side of her face. “What do you —”

“But that’s not very important.”

“Olive.” He pulled her closer, pressing his lips against her forehead. “It doesn’t matter. Whatever it is that you’re crying about, I will fix it. I will make it right. I—”

“Adam,” she interrupted him with a wet smile. “It’s not important, because the second thing, that’s what really matters.”

They were so close, now. She could smell his scent and his warmth, and his hands were cradling her face, thumbs swiping back and forth to dry her cheeks.

“Sweetheart,” he murmured. “What is the second thing?”

She was still crying, but she’d never been happier. So she said it, probably in the worst accent he’d ever heard.

“*Ik hou van jou*, Adam.”

Epilogue

RESULTS: *Careful analyses of the data collected, accounting for potential confounds, statistical error, and experimenter's bias, show that when I fall in love . . . things don't actually turn out to be that bad.*

Ten months later

"Stand there. You were standing right there."

"Was I?"

He was humoring her. A little. That deliciously put-upon expression had become Olive's favorite over the past year. "A bit closer to the water fountain. Perfect." She took a step back to admire her handiwork and then winked at him as she took out her phone to snap a quick picture. She briefly considered swapping it for her current screensaver—a selfie of the two of them in Joshua Tree a few weeks earlier, Adam squinting in the sun and Olive pressing her lips to his cheek—but then thought better of it.

Their summer had been full of hiking trips, and delicious ice cream, and late-night kisses on Adam's balcony, laughing and sharing untold stories and looking up at the stars, so much brighter than the ones Olive had once climbed on a ladder to stick to the ceiling of her bedroom. She was going to start working at a cancer lab at Berkeley in less than a week, which would mean a busier, more stressful schedule and a bit of a commute. And yet, she couldn't wait.

"Just stand there," she ordered. "Look antagonistic and unapproachable. And say 'pumpkin spice.' "

He rolled his eyes. “What’s your plan if someone comes in?”

Olive glanced around the biology building. The hallway was silent and deserted, and the dim after-hours lights made Adam’s hair look almost blue. It was late, and summer, and the weekend to boot: no one was going to come in. Even if they did, Olive Smith and Adam Carlsen were old news by now. “Like who?”

“Anh might show up. To help you re-create the magic.”

“Pretty sure she’s out with Jeremy.”

“Jeremy? The guy you’re in love with?”

Olive stuck her tongue out at him and glanced down at her phone. Happy. She was so happy, and she didn’t even know why. Except that she did know.

“Okay. In one minute.”

“You can’t know the exact time.” Adam’s tone was patient and indulgent. “Not to the minute.”

“Wrong. I ran a Western blot that night. I looked at my lab logs, and I reconstructed both the when and the where down to the error bars. I am a thorough scientist.”

“Hm.” Adam folded his arms across his chest. “How did that blotting turn out?”

“Not the point.” She grinned. “What were you doing here, by the way?”

“What do you mean?”

“A year ago. Why were you walking around the department at night?”

“I can’t remember. Maybe I had a deadline. Or maybe I was going home.” He shrugged, and scanned the hallway until his eyes fell on the water fountain. “Maybe I was thirsty.”

“Maybe.” She took a step closer. “Maybe you were secretly hoping for a kiss.”

He gave her a long, amused look. “Maybe.”

She took another step, and another, and another. And then her alarm beeped, once, right as she came to stand in front of him. Another intrusion of his personal space. But this time, when she pushed up on her toes, when she wrapped her arms around his neck, Adam’s hands pulled her deeper into himself.

It had been one year. Exactly one year. And by now his body was so familiar to her, she knew the breadth of his shoulders, the scratch of his stubble, the scent of his skin, all by heart; she could feel the smile in his eyes.

Olive sank into him, let him support her weight, and then moved until her mouth was almost level with his ear. She pressed her lips against its shell, and whispered softly into his skin.

“May I kiss you, Dr. Carlsen?”

Author's Note

I write stories set in academia because academia is all I know. It can be a very insular, all-consuming, isolating environment. In the past decade, I've had excellent (women) mentors who constantly supported me, but I could name dozens of instances in which I felt as though I was a massive failure blundering her way through science. But that, as everyone who's been there knows, is grad school: a stressful, high-pressure, competitive endeavor. Academia has its own special way of tearing apart work-life balance, wearing people down, and making them forget that they are worth more than the number of papers they publish or the grant money they are able to rake in.

Taking the thing I love the most (writing love stories) and giving it a STEM academia backdrop has been surprisingly therapeutic. My experiences have not been the same as Olive's (no academic fake dating for me, boo), but I still managed to pour many of my frustrations, joys, and disappointments into her adventures. Just like Olive, in the past few years I have felt lonely, determined, helpless, scared, happy, cornered, inadequate, misunderstood, enthusiastic. Writing *The Love Hypothesis* gave me the opportunity to turn these experiences around with a humorous, sometimes self-indulgent spin, and to realize that I could put my own misadventures into perspective —sometimes even laugh at them! For this reason—and I know I probably shouldn't say it—this book means as much to me as my Ph.D. dissertation did.

Okay—that's a lie. It means waaay more.

If you're not familiar with it, a few words about a topic that comes up quite a bit in the book: Title IX is a US federal law that prohibits any kind of discrimination on the basis of gender in all institutions that receive federal funding (i.e., most universities). It legally compels schools to respond to and remedy situations of misconduct ranging from hostile work environments to harassment and assault. Covered schools have Title IX coordinators, whose job is to handle complaints and violations and to educate an institution's community about their rights. Title IX has been and currently is critical to guarantee equal access to education and to protect students and employees against gender-based discrimination.

Lastly: the women in STEM organizations Anh mentions in the book are fictionalized, but most universities host chapters of similar organizations. For real-life resources on supporting women academics in STEM, visit awis.org. For resources that specifically support BIPOC women academics in STEM, visit sswoc.org.

Acknowledgments

First, just allow me to say: asgfgsfasdgfadg. I cannot believe this book exists. Truly, afgjsdfafksjfadg.

Second, allow me to further say: this book would *not* exist if approximately two hundred people hadn't held my hand for the past two years. *Cue end credits song.* In a very disorganized order, I must acknowledge:

Thao Le, my marvelous agent (your DM changed my life, for the very best); Sarah Blumenstock, my fantastic editor (who is *not* that kind of editor); Rebecca and Alannah, my very first betas (and shout-out to Alannah for the title!); my gremlins, for being gremalicious and for always defending the c.p.; Daddy Lucy and Jen (thank you for all the reads and the SM and the infinite hand-holding), Claire, Court, Julie, Katie, Kat, Kelly, Margaret, and my wife, Sabine (ALIMONE!) (as well as Jess, Shep, and Trix, my honorary grems). My Words Are Hard buds, for the whining support: Celia, Kate, Sarah, and Victoria. My TMers, who believed in me from the start: Court, Dani, Christy, Kate, Mar, Marie, and Rachelle; Caitie, for being the first IRL person who made me feel like I could talk about all of this; Margo Lipschultz and Jennie Conway, for the precious feedback on early drafts; Frankie, for the timeliest of prompts; Psi, for inspiring me with her beautiful writing; the Berkletes, for the pooping and the knotting; Sharon Ibbotson, for the invaluable editorial input and encouragement; Stephanie, Jordan, Lindsey Merril, and Kat, for beta reading my manuscript and helping me fix it; Lilith, for the stunning art and the amazing cover, as well as the

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The truth is, I never saw myself as someone who'd ever write anything but science articles. And I probably never would have if it hadn't been for all the fanfiction authors who posted amazing pieces online and encouraged me to start writing myself. And I certainly wouldn't have had the guts to start writing original fiction if it hadn't been for the support, the cheering, the encouragement, the con-crit I got from the Star Trek and Star Wars/Reylo fandoms. To everyone who has left a comment or kudos on my fics, who has given me shout-outs on social media, who has reached out in DMs, who has drawn art for me or made a mood board, who has cheered me on, who has taken the time to read something I've written: thank you. Really, thank you so much. I owe you a lot.

Last, and let's be real, also definitely least: some half-hearted thanks to Stefan, for all the love and the patience. You better not be reading this, you pretentious hipster.

Don't miss

Love on the Brain

coming soon from Berkley Jove!

"By the way, you can get leprosy from armadillos."

I peel my nose away from the airplane window and glance at Rocío, my research assistant. "Really?"

"Yep. They got it from humans millennia ago, and now they're giving it back to us." She shrugs. "Revenge and cold dishes and all that."

I scrutinize her beautiful face for hints that she's lying. Her large dark eyes, heavily rimmed with eyeliner, are inscrutable. Her hair is so Vantablack, it absorbs 99 percent of visible light. Her mouth is full, curved downward in its typical pout.

Nope. I got nothing. "Is this for real?"

"Would I ever lie to you?"

"Last week you swore to me that Stephen King was writing a Winnie-the-Pooh spin-off." And I believed her. Like I believed that Lady Gaga is a known satanist, or that badminton racquets are made from human bones and intestines. Chaotic goth misanthropy and creepy deadpan sarcasm are her brand, and I should know better than to take her seriously. Problem is, every once in a while she'll throw in a crazy-sounding story that upon further inspection (i.e., a Google search) is revealed to be true. For instance, did you know that the *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* was inspired by a true story? Before Rocío, I didn't. And I slept significantly better.

"Don't believe me, then." She shrugs, going back to her grad school admission prep book. "Go pet the leper armadillos and die."

She's such a weirdo. I adore her.

"Hey, you sure you're going to be fine, away from Alex for the next few months?" I feel a little guilty for taking her away from her boyfriend. When I was twenty-two, if someone had asked me to be apart from Tim for months, I'd have walked into the sea. Then again, hindsight has proven beyond doubt that I was a complete idiot, and Rocío seems pretty enthused for the opportunity. She plans to apply to Johns Hopkins's neuro program in the fall, and the NASA line on her CV won't hurt. She even hugged me when I invited her to come along—a moment of weakness I'm sure she deeply regrets.

"Fine? Are you kidding?" She looks at me like I'm insane. "Three months in Texas, do you know how many times I'll get to see La Llorona?"

"La . . . what?"

She rolls her eyes and pops in her AirPods. "You really know *nothing* about famed feminist ghosts."

I bite back a smile and turn back to the window. In 1905, Dr. Curie decided to invest her Nobel Prize money into hiring her first research assistant. I wonder if she, too, ended up working with a mildly terrifying, Cthulhu-worshipping emo girl. I stare at the clouds until I'm bored, and then I take my phone out of my pocket and connect to the complimentary in-flight Wi-Fi. I glance at Rocío, making sure that she's not paying attention to me, and angle my screen away.

I'm not a very secretive person, mostly out of laziness: I refuse to take on the cognitive labor of tracking lies and omissions. I do, however, have one secret. One single piece of information that I've never shared with anyone—not even my sister. Don't get me wrong, I trust Reike with my life, but I also know her well enough to picture the scene: she is wearing a flowy sundress and flirting with a Scottish shepherd she met in a trattoria on the Amalfi Coast. They decide to do the

shrooms they just purchased from a Belarusian farmer, and mid-trip she accidentally blurts out the one thing she's been expressly forbidden to repeat: her twin sister, Bee, runs one of the most popular and controversial accounts on Academic Twitter. The Scottish shepherd's cousin is a closeted men's rights activist who sends me a dead possum in the mail and rats me out to his insane friends, and I get fired.

No, thank you. I love my job (and possums) too much for this.

I created @WhatWouldMarieDo during my first semester of grad school. I was teaching a neuroanatomy class and decided to give my students an anonymous mid-semester survey to ask for honest feedback on how to improve the course. What I got was . . . not that. I was told that my lectures would be more interesting if I delivered them naked. That I should gain some weight, get a boob job, stop dying my hair "unnatural colors," get rid of my piercings. I was even given a phone number to call if I was "ever in the mood for a ten-inch dick." (Yeah, right.)

The messages were pretty appalling, but what sent me sobbing in a bathroom stall was the reactions of the other students in my cohort—Tim included. They laughed the comments off as harmless pranks and dissuaded me from reporting them to the department chair, telling me that I'd be making a stink about nothing.

They were, of course, all men.

(Seriously: Why *are* men?)

That night I fell asleep crying. The following day, I got up, wondered how many other women in STEM felt as alone as I did, and impulsively downloaded Twitter and made @WhatWouldMarieDo. I slapped on a poorly photoshopped pic of Dr. Curie wearing sunglasses and a one-line bio: *Making the periodic table girlier since 1889 (she/her).* I just wanted to

scream into the void. I honestly didn't think that anyone would even see my first Tweet. But I was wrong.

> @WhatWouldMarieDo What would Dr. Curie, first female professor at La Sorbonne, do if one of her students asked her to deliver her lectures naked?
>
> @198888 She would shorten his half-life.
>
> @annahhhh RAT HIM OUT TO PIERRE!!!
>
> @emily89 Put some polonium in his pants and watch his dick shrivel.
>
> @bioworm55 Nuke him NUKE HIM
>
> @lucyinthesea Has this happened to you? God I'm so sorry. Once a student said something about my ass and it was so gross and no one believed me.

Over half a decade later, after a handful of *Chronicle of Higher Education* nods, a *New York Times* article, and about a million followers, WWMD is my happy place. What's best is, I think the same is true for many others. The account has evolved into a therapeutic community of sorts, used by women in STEM to tell their stories, exchange advice, and . . . bitch.

Oh, we bitch. We bitch a lot, and it's glorious.

> @BiologySarah Hey, @WhatWouldMarieDo if she weren't given authorship on a project that was originally her idea and that she worked on for over one year? All other authors are men, because *of course* they are.

"Yikes." I scrunch my face and quote-tweet Sarah.

> Marie would slip some radium in their coffee. Also, she would consider reporting this to her institution's Office of Research Integrity, making sure to document every step of the process ♥

I hit send, drum my fingers on the armrest, and wait. My answers are not the main attraction of the account, not in the least. The real reason people reach out to WWMD is . . .

Yep. This. I feel my grin widen as the replies start coming in.

@DrAllixx This happened to me, too. I was the only woman and only POC in the author lineup and my name suddenly disappeared during revisions. DM if u want to chat, Sarah.

@AmyBernard I am a member of the Women in Science Association, and we have advice for situations like this on our website (they're sadly common)!

@TheGeologician Going through the same situation rn @BiologySarah. I did report it to ORI and it's still unfolding but I'm happy to talk if you need to vent.

@SteveHarrison Dude, breaking news: you're lying to yourself. Your contributions aren't VALUABLE enough to warrant authorship. Your team did you a favor letting you tag along for a while but if you're not smart enough, you're OUT. Not everything is about being a woman, sometimes you're just A LOSER

It is a truth universally acknowledged that a community of women trying to mind their own business must be in want of a random man's opinion.

I've long learned that engaging with basement-dwelling STEMlords who come online looking for a fight is never a good idea—the last thing I want is to provide free entertainment for their fragile egos. If they want to blow off some steam, they can buy a gym membership or play third-person-shooter video games. Like normal people.

I make to hide @SteveHarrison's delightful contribution but notice that someone has replied to him.

@Shmacademics Yeah, Marie, sometimes you're just a loser. Steve would know.

I chuckle.

@WhatWouldMarieDo Aw, Steve. Don't be too hard on yourself.

@Shmacademics He is just a boy, standing in front of a girl, asking her to do twice as much work as he ever did in order to prove that

she's worthy of becoming a scientist.

@WhatWouldMarieDo Steve, you old romantic.

@SteveHarrison Fuck you. This ridiculous push for women in STEM is ruining STEM. People should get jobs because they're good NOT BECAUSE THEY HAVE VAGINAS. But now people feel like they have to hire women and they get jobs over men who are MORE QUALIFIED. This is the end of STEM AND IT'S WRONG.

@WhatWouldMarieDo I can see you're upset about this, Steve.

@Shmacademics There, there.

Steve blocks both of us, and I chuckle again, drawing a curious glance from Rocío. @Shmacademics is another hugely popular account on Academic Twitter, and by far my favorite. He mostly tweets about how he should be writing, makes fun of elitism and ivory-tower academics, and points out bad or biased science. I was initially a bit distrustful of him—his bio says "he/him," and we all know how cis men on the internet can be. But he and I ended up forming an alliance of sorts. When the STEMlords take offense at the sheer idea of women in STEM and start pitchforking in my mentions, he helps me ridicule them a little. I'm not sure when we started direct messaging, when I stopped being afraid that he was secretly a retired Gamergater out to doxx me, or when I began considering him a friend. But a handful of years later, here we are, chatting about half a dozen different things a couple of times a week, without having even exchanged real names. Is it weird, knowing that Shmac had lice three times in second grade but not which time zone he lives in? A bit. But it's also liberating. Plus, having opinions online can be very dangerous. The internet is a sea full of creepy, cybercriminal fish, and if Mark Zuckerberg can cover his laptop webcam with a piece of tape, I reserve the right to keep things painfully anonymous.

The flight attendant offers me a glass of water from a tray. I shake my head, smile, and DM Shmac.

Marie: I think Steve doesn't want to play with us anymore.

Shmac: I think Steve wasn't held enough as a tadpole.

Marie: Lol!

Shmac: How's life?

Marie: Good! Cool new project starting next week. My ticket away from my gross boss

Shmac: I hope so. Can't believe dude's still around.

Marie: The power of connections. And inertia. What about you?

Shmac: Work's interesting.

Marie: Good interesting?

Shmac: Politicky interesting. So, no.

Marie: I'm afraid to ask. How's the rest?

Shmac: Weird.

Marie: Did your cat poop in your shoe again?

Shmac: No, but I did find a tomato in my boot the other day.

Marie: Send pics next time! What's going on?

Shmac: Nothing, really.

Marie: Oh, come on!

Shmac: How do you even know something's going on?

Marie: Your lack of exclamation points!

Shmac: !!!!!!!11!!1!!!!!

Marie: Shmac.

Shmac: FYI, I'm sighing deeply.

Marie: I bet. Tell me!

Shmac: It's a girl.

Marie: Ooooh! Tell me EVERYTHING!!!!!!!11!!1!!!!!

Shmac: There isn't much to tell.

Marie: Did you just meet her?

Shmac: No. She's someone I've known for a long time, and now she's back.

Shmac: And she is married.

Marie: To you?

Shmac: Depressingly, no.

Shmac: Sorry–we're restructuring the lab. Gotta go before someone destroys a 5 mil piece of equipment. Talk later.

Marie: Sure, but I'll want to know everything about your affair with a married woman

Shmac: I wish.

It's nice to know that Shmac is always a click away, especially now that I'm flying into the Wardass's frosty, unwelcoming lap.

I switch to my email app to check if Levi has finally answered the email I sent three days ago. It was just a couple of lines—*Hey, long time no see, I look forward to working together again, would you like to meet to discuss BLINK this weekend?*—but he must have been too busy to reply. Or too full of contempt. Or both.

Ugh.

I lean back against the headrest and close my eyes, wondering how Dr. Curie would deal with Levi Ward. She'd probably hide some radioactive isotopes in his pockets, grab popcorn, and watch nuclear decay work its magic.

Yep, sounds about right.

After a few minutes, I fall asleep. I dream that Levi is part armadillo: his skin glows a faint, sallow green, and he's digging a tomato out of his boot with an expensive piece of equipment. Even with all of that, the weirdest thing about him is that he's finally being nice to me.

WE'RE PUT UP in small furnished apartments in a lodging facility just outside the Johnson Space Center, only a couple of minutes from the Sullivan Discovery Building, where we'll be working. I can't believe how short my commute is going to be.

"Bet you'll still manage to be late all the time," Rocío tells me, and I glare at her while unlocking my door. It's not my fault if I've spent a sizable chunk of my formative years in Italy, where time is but a polite suggestion.

The place is considerably nicer than the apartment I rent—maybe because of the raccoon incident, probably because I buy 90 percent of my furniture from the as-is bargain corner at Ikea. It has a balcony, a dishwasher, and—huge improvement on my quality of life—a toilet that flushes 100 percent of the times I push the lever. Truly paradigm shifting. I excitedly open and close every single cupboard (they're all empty; I'm not sure what I expected), take pictures to send Reike and my coworkers, stick my favorite Marie Curie magnet to the fridge (a picture of her holding a beaker that says "I'm pretty rad"), hang my hummingbird feeder on the balcony, and then . . .

It's still only two-thirty p.m. Ugh.

Not that I'm one of those people who hates having free time. I could easily spend five solid hours napping, rewatching an entire season of *The Office* while eating Twizzlers, or moving to step 2 of the couch-to-5K plan I'm still very . . . okay, *sort of* committed to. But I am here! In Houston! Near the Space Center! About to start the coolest project of my life!

It's Friday, and I'm not due to check in until Monday, but I'm brimming with nervous energy. So I text Rocío to ask whether she wants to check out the Space Center with me (*No*.) or to grab dinner together (*I only eat animal carcasses*.).

She’s so mean. I love her.

My first impression of Houston is: big. Closely followed by: humid, and then by: humidly big. In Maryland, remnants of snow still cling to the ground, but the Space Center is already lush and green, a mix of open spaces and large buildings and old NASA aircraft on display. There are families visiting, which reminds me a little of an amusement park. I can’t believe I’m going to be seeing rockets on my way to work for the next three months. It sure beats the perv crossing guard who works on the NIH campus.

The Discovery Building is on the outskirts of the center. It’s wide, futuristic, and three-storied, with glass walls and a complicated-looking stair system I can’t quite figure out. I step inside the marble hall, wondering if my new office will have a window. I’m not used to natural light; the sudden intake of vitamin D might kill me.

“I’m Bee Königswasser.” I smile at the receptionist. “I’m starting work here on Monday, and I was wondering if I could take a look around?”

He gives me an apologetic smile. “I can’t let you in if you don’t have an ID badge. The engineering labs are upstairs—high-security areas.”

Right. Yes. The engineering labs. Levi’s labs. He’s probably up there, hard at work. Engineering. Labbing. Not answering my emails.

“No problem, that’s understandable. I’ll just—”

“Dr. Königswasser? Bee?”

I turn around. There is a blond young man behind me. He’s nonthreateningly handsome, medium height, smiling at me like we’re old friends even though he doesn’t look familiar. “ . . . Hi?”

“I didn’t mean to eavesdrop, but I caught your name, and . . . I’m Guy. Guy Kowalsky?”

The name clicks immediately. I break into a grin. “Guy! It’s so nice to meet you in person.” When I was first notified of BLINK, Guy was my point of contact for logistics questions, and he and I emailed back and forth a few times. He’s an astronaut—*an actual astronaut!*—working on BLINK while he’s grounded. He seemed so familiar with the project, I initially assumed he’d be my co-lead.

He shakes my hand warmly. “I love your work! I’ve read all your articles—you’ll be such an asset to the project.”

“Likewise. I can’t wait to collaborate.”

If I weren’t dehydrated from the flight, I’d probably tear up. I cannot believe that this man, this nice, pleasant man who has given me more positive interactions in one minute than Dr. Wardass did in one year, could have been my co-lead. I must have pissed off some god. Zeus? Eros? Must be Poseidon. Shouldn’t have peed in the Baltic Sea during my misspent youth.

“Why don’t I show you around? You can come in as my guest.” He nods to the receptionist and gestures at me to follow him.

“I wouldn’t want to take you away from . . . astronauting?”

“I’m between missions. Giving you a tour beats debugging any day.” He shrugs, something boyishly charming about him. We’ll get along great, I already know it.

“Have you lived in Houston long?” I ask as we step into the elevator.

“About eight years. Came to NASA right out of grad school. Applied for the Astronaut Corps, did the training, then a mission.” I do some math in my head. It would put him in his mid-thirties, older than I initially thought. “The past two or

so, I worked on BLINK's precursor. Engineering the structure of the helmet, figuring out the wireless system. But we got to a point where we needed a neurostimulation expert on board." He gives me a warm smile.

"I cannot wait to see what we cook up together." I also cannot wait to find out why Levi was given the lead of this project over someone who has been on it for five years. It just seems unfair. To Guy *and* to me.

The elevator doors open, and he points to a quaint-looking café in the corner. "That place over there—amazing sandwiches, worst coffee in the world. You hungry?"

"No, thanks."

"You sure? It's on me. The egg sandwiches are almost as good as the coffee is bad."

"I don't really eat eggs."

"Let me guess, a vegan?"

I nod. I try hard to break the stereotypes that plague my people and not use the word "vegan" in my first three meetings with a new acquaintance, but if they're the ones to mention it, all bets are off.

"I should introduce you to my daughter. She recently announced that she won't eat animal products anymore." He sighs. "Last weekend I poured regular milk in her cereal figuring she wouldn't know the difference. She told me that her legal team will be in touch."

"How old is she?"

"Just turned six."

I laugh. "Good luck with that."

I stopped having meat at seven, when I realized that the delicious *pollo* nuggets my Sicilian grandmother served nearly every day and the cute *galline* grazing about the farm were

more . . . connected than I originally suspected. Stunning plot twist, I know. Reike wasn't nearly as distraught: when I frantically explained that "Pigs have families, too. A mom and a dad and siblings that will miss them," she just nodded thoughtfully and said, "What you're saying is, we should eat the whole family?" I went fully vegan a couple of years later. Meanwhile, my sister has made it her life's goal to eat enough animal products for two. Together we emit one normal person's carbon footprint.

"The engineering labs are down this hallway," Guy says. The space is an interesting mix of glass and wood, and I can see inside some of the rooms. "A bit cluttered, and most people are off today—we're shuffling around equipment and reorganizing the space. We've got lots of ongoing projects, but BLINK's everyone's favorite child. The other astronauts pop by every once in a while just to ask how much longer it will be until their fancy swag is ready."

I grin. "For real?"

"Yep."

Making fancy swag for astronauts is my literal job description. I can add it to my LinkedIn profile. Not that anyone uses LinkedIn.

"The neuroscience labs—your labs—will be on the right. This way there are—" His phone rings. "Sorry—mind if I take it?"

"Not at all." I smile at his beaver phone case ("Nature's Engineer") and look away.

I wonder whether Guy would think I'm lame if I snapped a few pictures of the building for my friends. I decide that I can live with that, but when I take out my phone, I hear a noise from down the hallway. It's soft and chirpy, and sounds a lot like a . . .

“Meow.”

I glance back at Guy. He’s busy explaining how to put on *Moana* to someone very young, so I decide to investigate. Most of the rooms are deserted, labs full of large, abstruse equipment that looks like it belongs to . . . well. NASA. I hear male voices somewhere in the building, but no sign of the—

“Meow.”

I turn around. A few feet away, staring at me with a curious expression, is a beautiful young calico.

“And who might you be?” I slowly hold out my hand. The kitten comes closer, delicately sniffs my fingers, and gives me a welcoming headbutt.

I laugh. “You’re such a sweet girl.” I squat down to scratch her under her chin. She nips my finger, a playful love bite. “Aren’t you the most *purr*-fect little baby? I feel so *fur*-tunate to have met you.”

She gives me a disdainful look and turns away. I think she understands puns.

“Come on, I was just *kitten*.” Another outraged glare. Then she jumps on a nearby cart, piled ceiling-high with boxes and heavy, precarious-looking equipment. “Where are you going?”

I squint, trying to figure out where she disappeared, and that’s when I realize it. The piece of equipment? The precarious-looking one? It actually *is* precarious. And the cat poked it just enough to dislodge it. And it’s falling on my head.

Right.

About.

Now.

I have less than three seconds to move away. Which is too bad, because my entire body is suddenly made of stone,

unresponsive to my brain's commands. I stand there, terrified, paralyzed, and close my eyes as a jumbled chaos of thoughts twists through my head. *Is the cat okay? Am I going to die? Oh God, I* am *going to die. Squashed by a tungsten anvil like Wile E. Coyote. I am a twenty-first century Pierre Curie, about to get my skull crushed by a horse-drawn cart. Except that I have no chair in the physics department of the University of Paris to leave to my lovely spouse, Marie. Except that I have barely done a tenth of all the science I meant to do. Except that I wanted so many things and I never oh my God any second now—*

Something slams into my body, shoving me aside and into the wall.

Everything is pain.

For a couple of seconds. Then the pain is over, and everything is *noise*: metal clanking as it plunges to the floor, horrified screaming, a shrill "meow" somewhere in the distance, and, closer to my ear . . . someone is panting. Less than an inch from me.

I open my eyes, gasping for breath, and . . .

Green.

All I can see is green. Not dark, like the grass outside; not dull, like the pistachios I had on the plane. This green is light, piercing, intense. Familiar, but hard to place, not unlike—

Eyes. I'm looking up into the greenest eyes I've ever seen. Eyes that I've seen before. Eyes surrounded by wavy black hair and a face that's angles and sharp edges and full lips, a face that's offensively, imperfectly handsome. A face attached to a large, solid body—a body that is pinning me to the wall, a body made of a broad chest and two thighs that could moonlight as redwoods. Easily. One is slotted between my legs and it's holding me up. Unyielding. This man even smells like a forest—and *that mouth*. That mouth is still breathing heavily

on top of me, probably from the effort of whisking me off from under seven hundred pounds of mechanical engineering tools, and—

I *know* that mouth.

Levi.

Levi.

I haven't seen Levi Ward in six years. Six blessed, blissful years. And now here he is, pushing me into a wall in the middle of NASA's Space Center, and he looks . . . he looks . . .

"Levi!" someone yells. The clanking goes silent. What was meant to fall has settled on the floor. "Are you okay?"

Levi doesn't move, nor does he look away. His mouth works, and so does his throat. His lips part to say something, but no sound comes out. Instead a hand, at once rushed and gentle, reaches up to cup my face. It's so large, I feel perfectly cradled. Engulfed in green, cozy warmth. I whimper when it leaves my skin, a plaintive, involuntary sound from deep in my throat, but I stop when I realize that it's only shifting to the back of my skull. To the hollow of my collarbone. To my brow, pushing back my hair.

It's a cautious touch. Pressing but delicate. Lingering but urgent. As though he is studying me. Trying to make sure that I'm all in one piece. Memorizing me.

I lift my eyes, and for the first time I notice the deep, unmasked concern in Levi's eyes.

His lips move, and I think that, maybe—is he mouthing my name? Once, and then again? Like it's some kind of prayer?

"Levi? Levi, is she—"

My eyelids fall closed, and everything goes dark.

Photo courtesy of the author

Ali Hazelwood is a multipublished author—alas, of peer-reviewed articles about brain science, in which no one makes out and the ever after is not always happy. Originally from Italy, she lived in Germany and Japan before moving to the United States to pursue a Ph.D. in neuroscience. She recently became a professor, which absolutely terrifies her. When Ali is not at work, she can be found running, eating cake pops, or watching sci-fi movies with her two feline overlords (and her slightly-less-feline husband).

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CHAPTER 16

Adam

There is a brief moment, just a handful of seconds after Olive's mouth first presses against his own, in which Adam considers coming clean to her.

It's a shit idea. One of his worst to date, even after truly outdoing himself in the last month. He was the one to propose this farce to Olive, as though anything good could ever come of pretending to be in a relationship with the only woman he's looked at twice in the past decade. And he was the one to offer that she room with him, even though there are about thirty people in Boston who could put him up for the night.

He should have reached out to grad school friends. Jack's in Pasadena now, but George still lives here. So do Annika and Riley. Tom, of course, though he'd probably ask why Adam's not staying with Olive and make a few more jabs about how "whipped" he is. He'd have to make excuses, come up with a few lies, which… annoying. Tom can be annoying. People are annoying.

But at least Adam wouldn't be right here, Olive's hand soft on his face, her lips moving clumsily against his own, hesitant, delicate, a little fumbling in a way that tells him she hasn't done this in a while, and….

Adam's cock is hard as a rock. He's thirty-four years old. He's fully clothed, barely touching a woman who's fully clothed herself, and yet this kiss is without a doubt the most profoundly erotic experience of his life.

This must be it, the thing that's fucking with his head. The reason he's considering telling her everything. But Olive's lips are cool, her damp hair tickles his face, and her skin smells sweet, edible, glowing. Like the shower she took a handful of feet from him, the one he sternly ordered himself not to think about. He managed to, at least until he realized that she hadn't locked herself inside the bathroom. That's when he forgot to breathe, only cheap plywood and opportunity between them, and Olive trusted him to stay put.

Not that he would ever do anything else. But Adam has it even worse than he thought, if the idea of this girl trusting him with basic human decency has more of an effect on him than full-blown pornography.

"You're in love with her, aren't you?" Holden asked last week, noticing that Adam's eyes kept straying to his phone rather than the game on TV. And Adam rolled his eyes, looked back to the screen, and answered, *"I just want her to be safe. And happy. And to have what she needs."* Holden didn't say anything, just nodded and smiled knowingly, and that was the closest Adam had come to punching him since grad school.

So, what if Adam went ahead and did it? What if he told Olive the truth?

Pretty fucking tragic twist of fate, but you don't seem to remember that we first met years ago. An issue, since I remember a little too well. I like no one, absolutely no one, but I liked you from the start. I liked you when I didn't know you, and now that I do know you it's only gotten worse. Sometimes, often, always, I think about you before falling asleep. Then I dream of you, and when I wake up my head's still there, stuck on something funny, beautiful, filthy, intelligent that's all about you. It's been going on for a while, longer than you think, longer than you can imagine, and I should have told you, but I have this impression, this certainty that you're half a second from running away, that I should give you enough reasons to stay. Is there anything I can do for you? I'll take you grocery shopping and fill your fridge when we're back home. Buy you a new bike and a case of decent reagent and that sludge you drink. Kill the people who made you cry. Is there something you need? Name it. It's yours. If I have it, it's yours.

There is no scenario in which any of this won't send her screaming. And after the last few days, weeks, years, all Olive needs is to have a little quiet. A safe space. A place to run *to*, not *from*. So Adam makes his decision: he tucks the truth away one more time, and when she pulls back, a faint smile on her lips and a hopeful look in her eyes, he shakes his head.

"Olive, this is . . . no."

"Why?" There is a frown between her brows. That Adam put there himself, because he is fucking *bad* for her.

"This is not what we're here for."

Her nostrils flare. "That doesn't mean that—"

"You're upset. And drunk."

She rolls her eyes, impatient, and his hands itch to pull her closer. Kiss her again. Kiss her in every fucking place. She's a brat. An incessant, outrageous smartass, and he has to clench his fist to avoid reaching for her.

"I had two beers. *Hours* ago," she says irritably, and Adam feels himself grow just as irritated. He's in no condition to fight her on this. Not when he's already busy fighting himself.

"You're a grad student, Olive, currently depending on me for a place to stay. And even if not, the power I have over you could easily turn this into a coercive dynamic—"

She laughs. Like the one thing that scares the shit out of him and keeps him awake at night—that she'll get hurt from this thing they're doing, that there are signals he's not picking up, that he is harming her or taking advantage—is little more than a funny joke.

"I'm not feeling coerced." She scoffs, like the possibility is ridiculous to her, maybe it's her tone, maybe her scent in his nostrils, but Adam's control snaps.

"You're in love with *someone else*," he tells her, angry, cruel, sparing nothing.

And Olive stops laughing. Instead she flinches, nearly recoils away from him, and Adam instantly wants to punch himself and take it back.

Great job, asshole. Throw it in her face. Remind her that the guy she does care about is off somewhere with her closest friend. It's not like you know exactly *how it feels, wanting someone who'd rather be with someone else. It's not like you can relate every fucking minute you spend with her.*

"Olive." He pinches the bridge of his nose, trying to calm down. Being brusque and short-tempered should be nothing new to him, but Olive does something to the chemistry of his brain, something that makes him mellow, patient, as content as someone like him can hope to be. A snarly, feral beast, tamed at last. Problem is, neither of them seems to be doing great tonight. Olive is tired and confused. Adam is tired, too, but also horny, and tempted, and ground-down to the bones after weeks and weeks of wanting and not having. More than a little pathetic about this girl.

He needs to be better, because this is not about him. He promised himself at the very start that his time with Olive would always be about *her*, and that's why he needs to attempt something radical to his nature: diplomacy.

He closes his eyes, and takes a deep breath, and thinks of a sensitive way of saying, *You think you want me to fuck you, but you don't. The problem is, I really,* really *do, which*

makes this a risky conversation for us to have. You should go to sleep. Get some rest while three feet away from you I try to forget that black dress of yours. Or the time you brought up the idea of us fucking in my office. Or when you wiggled in my lap for one hour, and all I could think was that in a just world, an ideal world, this thing we're doing would have been real, and those intrusive, half-formulated, lurid fantasies I have about you wouldn't send you screaming, and—

"Adam, I…"

He needs to wrap up this conversation, and then go for a ten-mile run. He's exhausted and not fit to be around.

"This is how you're feeling now," he says, trying to sound reasonable even though he feels anything but. Olive presses her lips together, her nostrils flare, and Adam powers through. "A month from now, a week, tomorrow, I don't want you to regret…" he trails off the second he notices something: maybe she isn't *angry*? Because what she looks like is… *hurt*? Betrayed? Blinking quickly, like she's about to cry again.

He snaps his mouth shut. No. She's not going to feel like that. Not because of *him*.

"Olive—"

"What about what *I* want?" She leans forward, eyes blazing. Okay, she's angry alright. Fiercely, beautifully so. "What about the fact that *I* want this? Though maybe you don't care, because *you* don't want it, right? Maybe I'm just not attractive to you, and you don't want to—"

He really *is* fucking exhausted. Or his control would be better than this: closing his finger around her wrist and pulling her hand down to his cock. It's hard, he's hard, he's hard all the time, and if she wants to lie to herself then so be it, but not on his damn watch.

"You have no fucking idea what I want," he hisses.

Except that now she must. His jaw rolls. He holds her wide, shocked eyes, presses her even closer, shows her *exactly* what he wants, what she does, what he deals with, what it's been like for the past three years, and—

Shit. Adam immediately lets go of her and looks away, but the damage is done, and this—*this* is why he shouldn't be allowed *anywhere* near her. If he cannot be trusted not to spill the extent to which he's gone for her, he needs to get the hell out of here. He even makes to stand, but stops the second she whispers,

“Well, then.”

He glances up. Olive’s expression has cleared. She looks calmer all of a sudden. Relieved. Determined. Like—and this makes absolutely no sense—like the one thing she’s afraid of is not Adam himself, but the idea of him *rejecting* her.

She steps close. Closer still. Her smell is in his nostrils, her thighs press against the inside of his own, and this was heady and harrowing twenty seconds ago, but it’s rapidly becoming unbearable. How beautiful she is—it confuses him. It’s a constant pressure that doesn’t let go, and Adam has to shut his eyes tight just to pretend that she’s not within reach. “This is not why I asked you to room with me.”

“I know.” She’s touching him, now. Of her own free will. Pushing hair away from his forehead. Her fingers are cool and soft and capable, the same fingers she does science with, and he wants to lean into her. “It’s also not why I accepted.” *You don’t like being touched, dickhead,* he reminds himself. *You hate it, in fact. Remember who you were, back when your life wasn’t a montage of the times this girl touched you because she had to?*

“When we started this, you said no sex,” he points out, in a half-hearted, last-ditch attempt at stopping this. Like he’d ever tell her no. The things he would do for her. The things he would do *to* her.

“I also said it was going to be an on-campus thing. And we just went out for dinner. So.” She shrugs her shoulders. The fabric of his shirt ripples against her breasts, and okay. Okay.

He’s considering this. He cannot stop himself.

“I don’t . . .” He rubs his forehead. *Don’t say it. It’ll mess you up. Basic self-preservation. Don’t do it.* But he knows that if she asks, he’ll fuck her. Even just to take her mind away from what’s bothering her. He’ll hopefully make it good enough, and tomorrow she’ll act like nothing happened.

Adam’s life won’t ever be the same.

“I don’t have anything,” he says.

She stares at him for a long moment, uncomprehending. Then her cheeks redden. “Oh, I… It doesn’t matter. I’m on birth control.” She bites into her lip, and he feels it like a hand on his own body. “But we could also do . . . other things.”

Other things.

Other *things*.

Ah, yes. Other things.

He lets his eyes roam her for a moment. As stupefied as he was by her waves and her makeup and that nearly-too-short dress, she'll never be more lovely to him than with her face scrubbed pink, her hair messy and wild. Her body is lithe, graceful, strong, and he takes in the shapeless t-shirt, the slight swell of her breasts, the curve of her hips. All things he hasn't allowed himself to look at for weeks—for *years*. It never mattered: they were always there, stuck in his brain. The curve of her lower back while she opened the seminar door with her shoulder. The line of her throat as she drank from a water bottle. A graceful stretch and a sliver of stomach skin.

He can think of *other things* to do with her. With every single part of her. So many indecent, beautiful, obscene things. *What's too much Olive? What can I ask you to do, how many times? You should be careful. Set boundaries. Tell me what you want.*

"After." Adam swallows. Takes a deep breath. Tells himself to wind down. *Nothing might happen. Maybe she wants to make out a little. Fool around. Be held. It's fine.* "I need to know you won't hate me for this, after. That if we go back and you change your mind—"

"I won't. I . . ." She comes even closer. "I've never been surer of anything. Except maybe cell theory." She smiles. First tentative, then hopeful, then bright, and then she leans over to kiss him again, and…

He never stood a chance. Never, and certainly not this time, when it's so different from all the others. They've kissed before, sure, and… it's been nice. Too nice, sometimes, but also interrupted. Frustrating. Unfinished. Performative. Always the start of something, never the end. This time, though… This time there's no one around, and after a moment of reluctance, Adam lets himself do what he wants.

He deepens the kiss. Brings Olive closer. Inhales the scent of her, familiar by now, soft skin and sugar and fake-dating Wednesdays. He's wanted her for so long, this feels like something imagined, right out of a dream. He could start by devouring her. By going on his knees and burying his face in her sweet pussy. By taking off her top, memorizing every inch of her for *after*. He won't rush her, though, so he makes himself get rid of his own shirt to feel more of her skin, and then stays put, sat on the side of the bed like a big, hulking animal trying to play nice. It doesn't feel like this'll be enough, not with the

way she gasps every time his tongue brushes against hers, not when his palm is cupping her ass, but he *can* go slow. He *can* feel her nipples, pointy and hard against his chest, but he'll be okay just sucking at a spot on her throat. He *can* let his hand slide up to rest on the soft underside of her breast, but he doesn't need to see it. And he *can*…

Olive is saying something. And Adam's brain is too dazed to parse language. "What?"

"You did it that night, too." She's smiling. All he wants to think about is making her come. Can he do it? It's been a while. He wishes he had more practice. For her.

"I… what?"

"You touched me. Here." Her hand covers his through the cotton, and he takes it as permission. He lifts her shirt slowly, giving her time to object, stopping the instant her breath catches, at the first sign of hesitation. Right under her tits, which almost has him groaning in desperation, but—no. Patient. He can be fucking patient till she's comfortable.

He waits, and meanwhile he presses his lips against her ribs. Bites softly. Licks. She tastes sweet, and he wonders if she'd let him go down on her. Seems like asking for too much, but maybe.

"Here?" he says. "Olive. Here?" The underside of her breast is right there, and she's not answering him, just clutching him like she'll fall if she doesn't, and okay. Okay, yes: he wants to fuck her into the mattress. No point in pretending he doesn't. "Pay attention, sweetheart." The underside of her breast is right there, so he runs his tongue across, he sucks on it, and she whimpers. "Here?"

He doesn't hear her answer. He's a little distracted, because her shirt is finally coming off, and…

There is a split second of insecurity, he thinks. A short moment of hesitation when he can tell that Olive is thinking of covering herself. Her back nearly hunches, Adam can almost smell the panic between them, and he's ready to put a stop to this, right now. But then her shoulders square, like she's decided that she doesn't mind showing him her body after all, and…

Okay.

Yeah.

So it's been a long time for him. Years, he'd guess. Not since grad school, and even then he never quite… There was about a decade or so, in which Adam thought he'd had just

enough sex in his life to know with the utmost certainty that he wasn't interested in having any more. No real reason for it, just… no. And then—Olive. He almost laughed in his office, at being asked to be secretive about dating other women. At the reptilian, greedy part of his brain, thinking: *Are there any? I thought it was just you.*

"Do you remember it?" she's saying, and her breasts. Her small, beautiful tits. The long dip in the center of her stomach. Her toned, smooth legs. He wants to tuck her underneath him for safekeeping. For months.

"Remember what?" he asks, absent, transfixed. His own voice sounds distant.

"Our first kiss."

"I want to keep you in this hotel room for a week," he murmurs, because it's the truth. Can he touch her? He'll stop if she tells him to. But. "For a year."

He's losing track of time. Missing beats. Not out of control, but getting bolder. He splays his hand against her back, brings her closer to his mouth, arches her up like an offering, and he misses a bit of what comes after because it feels *that* good. He doesn't want to be rough, but the noises Olive is making are spellbinding, breathless moans and sharp inhales.

Then her muscles tense. It's sudden, and he feels the second it happens, like a bucket of ice over his head. He immediately pulls back. "This okay?"

She's in her head about something. Her expression is far away, and as much as his cock hurts, something switches in his brain. He wants to lick her tits, yes, but he wants to reassure her more.

He sets his hand on her hip, thumb swiping back and forth on her hip bone, trying to look at her face. "You're tense. We don't have to—"

"I want to." She sounds scared. A little defensive. Definitely in her head. "I said I did."

"It doesn't matter what you said. You can always change your mind."

"I won't."

She's stubborn. She's stubborn, and he likes that about her, just like every other damn thing, but this… He's just not willing to risk moving this along if she's having any doubt. So he squeezes his cock till near pain and stops. Slows down. Brings her into himself, rests his forehead on her sternum, matches his breathing with hers, feels her arms form a loose loop around his neck, lets himself smell the sweetness between them.

It takes several moments, but she slowly softens, relaxing into him. First pliant, her nose rubbing softly against his hair, then restless. Eager all over again.

Holden and his stupid, supremely idiotic questions. Of course Adam is in love with Olive, of fucking course. And that's why this is nice, too. Just being with her. Near her. A little painful, maybe, but a whole lot nice.

"I think I've changed my mind," he says against her skin. His fingers are tracing the elastic of her panties—cotton, green polka dots. He's going to steal them once they're done. He's going to build a shrine for them. Do unspeakable things with them.

"I know I'm not doing anything," Olive says, something reedy in her voice, "but if you tell me what you like, I can—"

"My favorite color must be green, after all."

She's wet already. Adam cannot quite believe it, so he presses his thumb to her panties, just to make sure. But once his finger is there, he cannot help himself. He moves the tip up and down between her legs, over and over. He wants to remember this moment. Store it for later. Archive it in his DNA.

"Do you . . . Do you want me to take them off?"

Yes. But no. This underwear is probably all that's between her and Adam begging her to let him fuck her. Better on for now. "Not yet"

She squirms, impatient. "But if we—"

He pushes the cotton to the side because he cannot help himself, and that's a mistake. She looks ready. Ripe. A perfect piece of fruit. He wonders if it means that he could fuck her now. That it could be fast, a little messy, and she'd still be okay. She'd take it. She'd enjoy it. He'd make it good, hopefully. Maybe. If he remembers how. If he doesn't blow it in twenty seconds. If he doesn't blow it right now, just looking at his fingers trace her glistening pussy, circle around her clit, disappear between her plump folds, and she's wet, she's really fucking *wet,* wet in a way that makes it easy to lie to himself and pretend that it's *him* she wants, not just anyone who'll take her mind off a shitty day. He watches her arch up, close her eyes, let out a low moan, exhale in something that is so obviously pleasure. Adam strokes himself and *knows* it, that he's going to come just from looking at her.

"You are so beautiful." He can't remember ever saying it to a woman before—why state obvious facts—but with Olive the words burst out of him. "May I?" he rasps against her

nipples when finds her entrance, not quite sounding like himself, and the second his finger is inside her he—

"Fuck." It's a tight fit, which makes his cock twitch even harder. His vision darkens to black spots. For a few seconds he can feel his heartbeat drumming in his ears, pleasure stabbing in his loins. He forgets about everything that's not Olive, everything that's not the places where he's touching her. She feels like the best thing that's ever happened to him, but better. And then… Then she's moving. Squirming while impaled on his finger, in a way that broadcasts very little enjoyment, and the wave of pleasure that was about to crash right into him, it abruptly recedes.

Adam freezes.

"Hey. Shh." This is not really working—him in her. So he tries to still her hips, and when that doesn't do the trick he grazes her clit again with his thumb, hoping it will help her soften. She whimpers, closes a hand around his arm with trembling fingers. Her nipples are hard little pebbles and she seems to like it, seems to breathe faster and break into a sweat and maybe want more—but she stays just as tight. "It's okay. Relax." He tries to stretch her. Work his finger in a little deeper. See where he can go. She's wet inside, really wet, and it shouldn't be this difficult, he doesn't think.

Problem is, he cannot read her. Not consistently. Granted, he has very little recent experience, and even less clarity of mind with Olive grinding against his hand. She lets out soft groans, deep breaths, but then she'll wince, claw her nails into his biceps, and that's putting the brakes on pretty quickly for him, the idea that she might be in any kind of pain. "Does it hurt?" he tries to ask. She shakes her head, but a second later he sees her flinch. "Why are you so tense, Olive?" he asks, distracted, staring at his finger inside her. "You've done this before, right?"

It's a stupid question, and he instantly wants to punch himself for asking it. Of course, she's done this before—look at her. She's not like Adam. She probably does this—

"Um, a couple of times. In college."

Adam goes still. His mind empties, then blanks. Then the enormity of what is happening hits him like a freight train, and he gently pulls away, shaking his head.

This is… no. No. It's a mistake. She clearly doesn't take sex lightly, which means that she deserves to have it with someone… better. Someone else. Someone who's not this much older than her, who never failed her friend's dissertation proposal, who doesn't

need to set an alarm for one AM to remember to stop working and go to sleep. Someone who didn't spend the last several years pining across lecture rooms, someone who doesn't picture her when he—

"It doesn't matter, I can figure it out, I've learned whole-cell patch clamp in a couple of hours, sex can't be much harder," she says quickly. Like she's under the impression that he's put off by her inexperience. "And I bet you do this all the time, so you can tell me how to—"

"You'd lose."

"I… what?"

"You'd lose your bet." He sighs. His stupid, moronic cock has never been this hard. Because part of him likes this. The lie he could spin to himself: that this means something to her. That *he* means something to her. "I can't."

"Of course you can."

He shakes his head. "I'm sorry."

"What? No. No, I—"

"You're basically a vir—"

"I'm not!"

"Olive."

"I am not."

"But so close to it that—"

"No, that's not the way it works. Virginity is not a continuous variable, it's categorical. Binary. Nominal. Dichotomous. Ordinal, potentially. I'm talking about chi-square, maybe Spearman's correlation, logistic regression, the logit model and that stupid sigmoid function, and . . ."

She does *this* every single time. Makes him want to laugh, like he's somehow not really the sulky, humorless person he knows himself to be. Every Wednesday, she makes him forget that he's supposed to be antagonistic and unapproachable, to hate the entire world, and even though it's a terrible idea, he's touching her again, smiling against her mouth while she laughs into his, telling her between kisses to stop being a smart-ass, and then, once they're too close again: "Olive, if for any reason sex is something that you are not comfortable with, or that you'd rather not have outside of a relationship, then—"

"No. No, it's nothing like that. I—" He pulls back and watches her, patient. Wanting to understand. "It's not that I want to *not* have sex. I just . . . don't particularly want to have it. There is something weird about my brain, and my body, and—I don't know what's wrong with me, but I don't seem to be able to experience attraction like other people. Like normal people. I tried to just . . . just to do it, to get it over with, and the guy I did it with was nice, but the truth is that I just don't feel any… sexual attraction unless I actually get to trust and like a person, which for some reason never happens. Or, almost never. It hadn't, not in a long time, but now—I really like you, and I really trust you, and for the first time in a million years I want to…"

Adam wants to tell her that there's nothing weird with her brain. That he'd forgotten sex was something he was *supposed* to want for years before meeting her. That he knows exactly what she's saying. But it's a risky truth to admit amidst the lies, and so he just looks at her, takes in her words, and for the first time in weeks wonders if maybe there is hope.

He hasn't let himself before. He's not one to lie, not even to himself, and the delusion that this will end in anything but a clean cut on September 29th is a dangerous one to entertain. But if Olive trusts him. If she *trusts* him.

Maybe not now. Nor soon. She's in love with someone else, and these things take time. But next year they'll be both here in Boston, and maybe, if she already *trusts* him, Adam could convince her to let him take care of her. He doesn't want anything in return. She doesn't need to fall for him, because he loves her enough for the both of them. But if she *trusts* him—

"I want to do this," she's telling him. "With you. I really do."

Adam can feel his heart expand, grow full of something fragile and unfamiliar. "Me too, Olive. You have no idea."

"Then, please. Please, don't say no. Please?" She nibbles on his lip, his jaw, the skin under his ear, until he takes a deep breath and nods and realizes that if this is going to happen—and it is, it absolutely fucking is—he needs be better at it. Make her comfortable. So he picks her up and deposits her on his bed, smiling at the surprised, laughing yelp she lets out.

"Okay?" he asks when she's on her back, shifting on top of her, taking in her small nod and the new view—hair fanning hair, pale skin, jutting hip bones. He wants to lick them.

Then he wants to feed her sugary foods, keep her warm and safe till her ribs don't stick out so much anymore. The skin of her belly—he will think about it years from now, get himself off to the memories of each soft freckle. He takes her panties off, finally, *finally,* and she's wearing knee socks, bright and happy, and… just like everything else she's ever done, he's apparently into that. He's into that *a lot.*

"Adam?"

Her voice is airy, and he takes it as an ask to hurry up. To push her legs wide open with his palms on her inner thighs and smell her lovely, honey scent. She's wet and sticky under his lips, smooth and soft, and he thinks he blacks out from it a little. From the pleasure of doing this to her, of exploring her with his tongue. He's almost sure he's done this before, and even though he doesn't remember when, or with whom, he's positive she was nothing like Olive. Her ass fits perfectly in his palm, he can span her hips with his fingers, and it's a bit of a power trip, the way he can easily angle her for him to lick, and… She's lithe. Especially compared to the oafish, lumbering mountain Adam is. He's tried very hard to pretend it doesn't turn him on to the extent that it does, but… no. Not possible to lie to himself, not when he's sucking on the lips of her pussy and she's moaning in the palm of her hand. It makes him want to get closer, learn her even more, and—

And then she's telling him to stop.

It takes a moment to penetrate the trance he's been put into, but when it does he goes still. "Have you changed your mind?"

"No. But we should do . . . other things."

"You don't like this?"

"Well, I've never . . ."

Adam tries to imagine having sex with Olive and not begging her to let him do this. Seems absurd. Beyond belief.

"But I'm the one who put you up to this," she adds, "so we should do things that *you* are into, and not stuff for me . . ."

He finally catches her meaning and growls deep in his throat. He closes his eyes, lays his forehead against her thighs, and contemplates trashing the entire damn hotel room. But it would scare Olive, and do absolutely nothing to convince her that she is beautiful and fuckable, that he wants to absorb her into himself and lick her dry, that this is

for *him* more than for her. So he opts for something else: pressing his tongue against her clit, gripping her squirming waist to still her, to make her take his fingers and his tongue inside her. He holds her wide open, watches her arch on the mattress in a beautiful, perfect bow. He hears her soft noises and feels her tense, clutch at his hair and shoulders with a frustrated, impatient sort of desperation, like she wants to come but she's afraid she won't, and he loves the feeling of it, the illusion that this precipice they're hovering on together is unending, hidden in space and time. An arc of pleasure, suspended. But then she comes with sweet whimpers and slow, strong contractions, and Adam's gut tightens, and his vision whites. He'd love to fuck her, but he might come from just this, and that's okay. He wants to watch her again. She's sensitive, writhing, laughing, small and tight and warm, beautiful, so beautiful, so powerful and perfect and beautiful. When it's too much, when she pulls him up to her, he presses her into bed with his legs and his arms and his hands, watches her twitch with the last aftershocks of pleasure, feels her little heart beat a drum against his own. In this moment, he has everything. Every last thing he needs.

"Can I fuck you?" he asks against her mouth.

She kisses him back. Pulls him closer. Traces his hot, sweaty skin. He's not worthy, but he wants her anyway. "Mmm?"

"Can I fuck you? Please?"

She nods and reaches down for him, but he's not sure there's time for it. He's hard in a way that's painful and urgent, different from ever before, and Olive's flawless, soft, tight pussy is right there, ready for him, and when he begins to slide inside his existence narrows to bare details: the pressure around his cock, strained, world-defining; Olive's eyes holding his own, shocked-wide; the air between them, warm, heavy.

"You're so big," she gasps.

He groans into her neck. Maybe he is big. Still. "You can take it." Nothing, nothing exists, except for the pleasure tingling at the base of his spine.

"I can," she agrees. Adam has to close his eyes, or it will be over right now. He rocks inside her, and it's torture. Delicious, drowning torture. "What if it's too much?"

It seems like a distinct possibility. He can't imagine thrusting into her the way he needs to, because she's small, and he's not. "Then I'll fuck you like this." It's already getting better. She's still sealed tight around him, but he's making progress, getting a little

farther, and the way she pulsates around him is splendidly, obscenely good. They're both breathing fast, loud. She's not positioned right for him to push deeper, that's the problem. He lets his hand slide to her thigh and shifts it to open her more. Just a little more.

"Is there something I should be–"

"Shhh. Be quiet for a moment, so I don't come already."

She's starting to move underneath him. Like she's impatient for this to progress, even though he's about to snap from the tension of keeping it slow. He wants to sink his teeth into her. Tether her to him. Keep her in check. He withdraws a bit, which his body hates and seems pretty fucking stupid, but pushing back in is beyond anything.

"Maybe you should."

He should what? Ah, yeah. They're talking about him, coming. "I should?"

She nods, and he wants to kiss her, she wants to kiss him too, but they're not quite able to do it, too distracted, too dazed, and he lets out a silent laugh, thinking about the two of them attempting this. Both of them barely knowing what they're doing, and yet somehow making this spectacular, magnificent chaos. "Inside you?"

She nods, like whatever he'd ask of her, she'd give him. "If you want to."

He does. He thinks of it a lot—base, filthy fantasies of making a mess on her, making a mess *in* her, leaving his mark. He has lots of those. A few more than he should. "You're driving me insane," he says into her clavicle, and that's when something gives. A second of slick friction. Then he finds himself as deep as he can go, and everything stops.

The universe rearranges into something better.

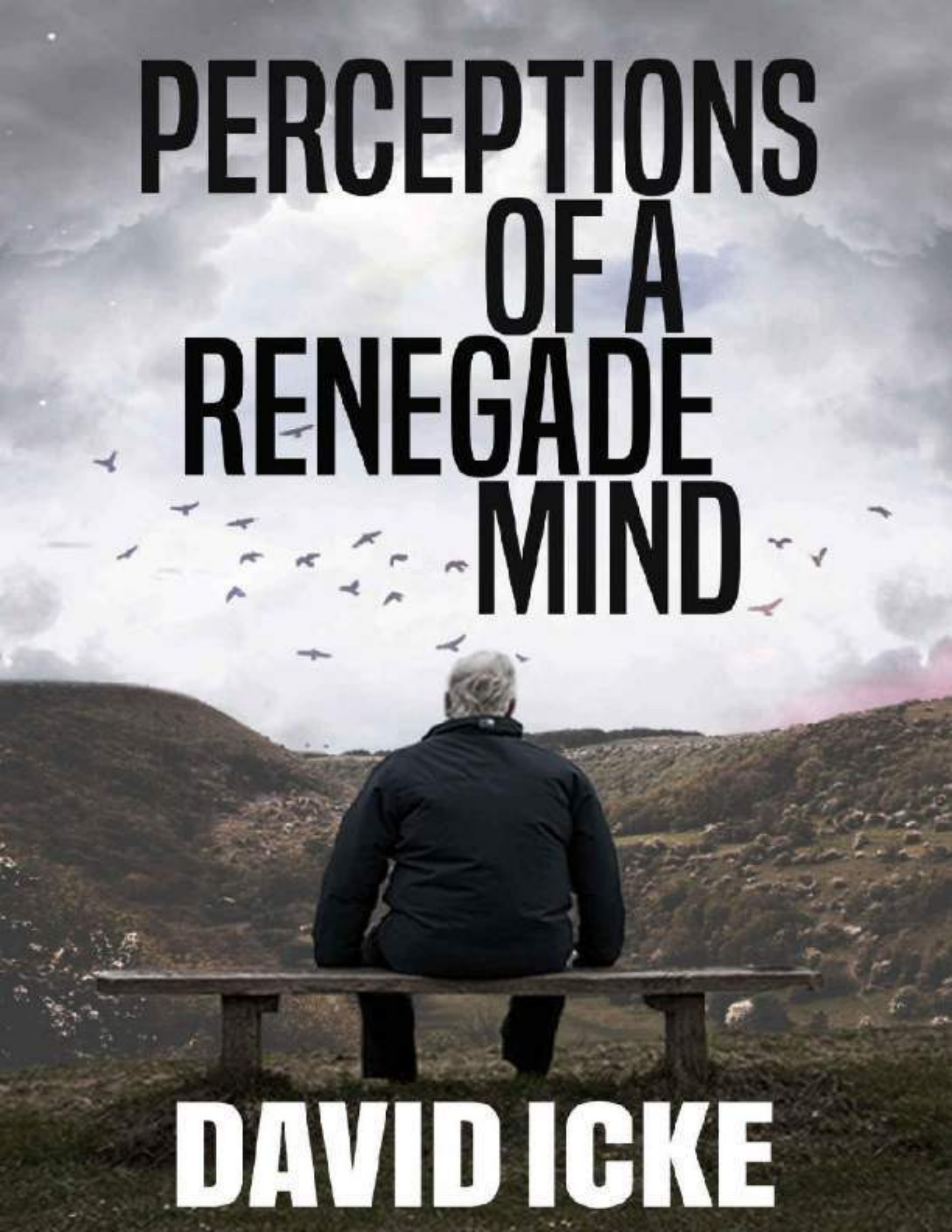
They're both still for a moment. Then they exhale sharp sounds in the silent room. Olive lifts a hand, just to run her fingers through his hair, and Adam is speechless. Mindless. This is—Jesus. Oh, God.

She smiles at him, happy, hopeful, beautiful and says, "Hey."

Adam smiles, too, and thinks, *This is it*. He thinks, *I love you*. He thinks, *Maybe, one day, you'll even let me tell you.*

And he says, "Hey."

PERCEPTIONS OF A RENEGADE MIND



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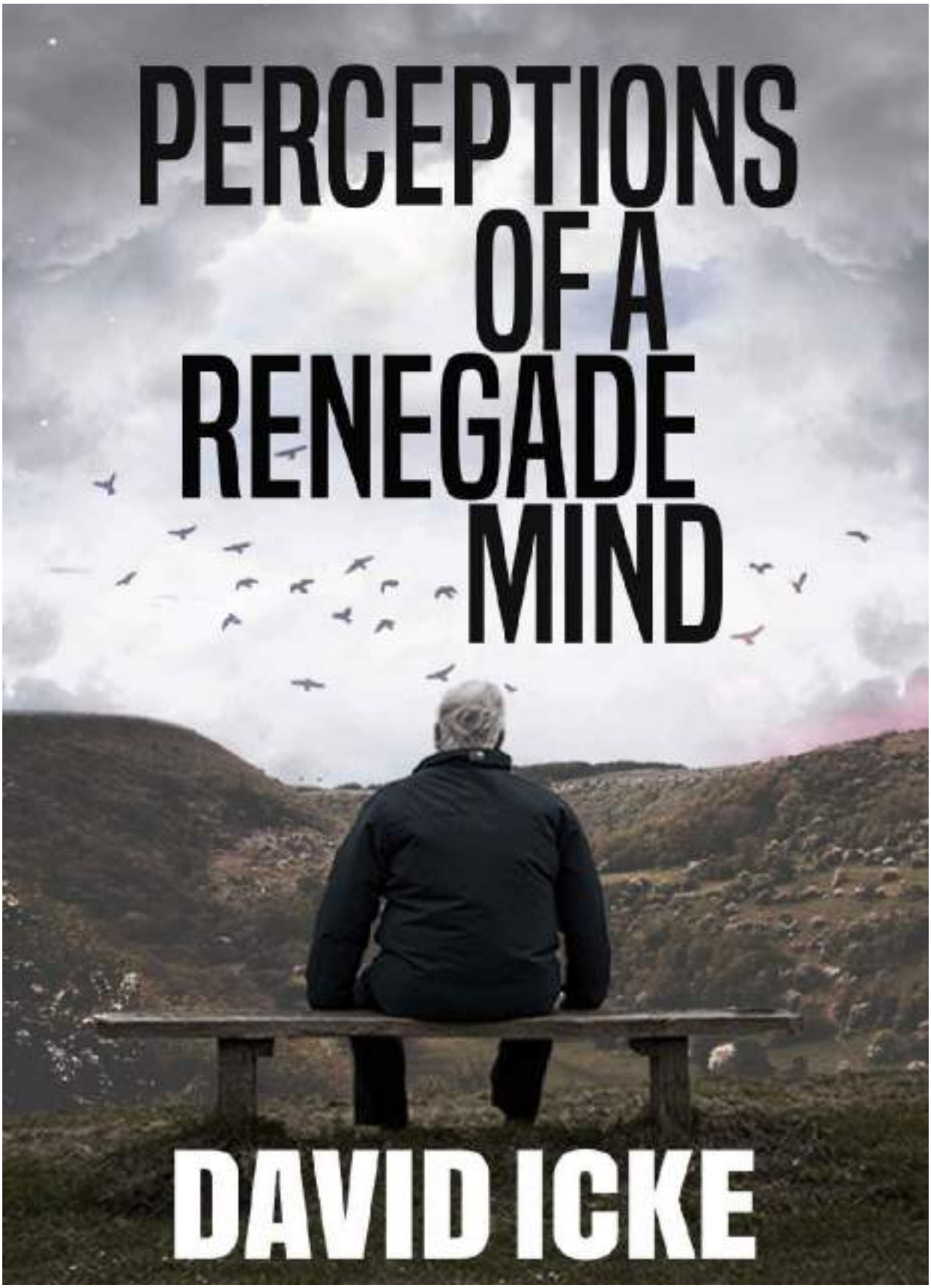
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DAVID ICKE

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Renegade:
Adjective
‘Having rejected tradition: Unconventional.’
Merriam-Webster Dictionary

Acquiescence to tyranny is the death of the spirit

You may be 38 years old, as I happen to be. And one day, some great opportunity stands before you and calls you to stand up for some great principle, some great issue, some great cause. And you refuse to do it because you are afraid … You refuse to do it because you want to live longer … You're afraid that you will lose your job, or you are afraid that you will be criticised or that you will lose your popularity, or you're afraid that somebody will stab you, or shoot at you or bomb your house; so you refuse to take the stand.

Well, you may go on and live until you are 90, but you're just as dead at 38 as you would be at 90. And the cessation of breathing in your life is but the belated announcement of an earlier death of the spirit.

Martin Luther King

How the few control the many and always have – the many do whatever they're told

'Forward, the Light Brigade!'
Was there a man dismayed?
Not though the soldier knew
Someone had blundered.
Theirs not to make reply,
Theirs not to reason why,
Theirs but to do and die.
Into the valley of Death
Rode the six hundred.

Cannon to right of them,
Cannon to left of them,
Cannon in front of them
Volleyed and thundered;
Stormed at with shot and shell,
Boldly they rode and well,
Into the jaws of Death,
Into the mouth of hell
Rode the six hundred

Alfred Lord Tennyson (1809-1892)

The mist is lifting slowly
I can see the way ahead
And I've left behind the empty streets
That once inspired my life
And the strength of the emotion
Is like thunder in the air
'Cos the promise that we made each other
Haunts me to the end

The secret of your beauty
And the mystery of your soul
I've been searching for in everyone I meet
And the times I've been mistaken
It's impossible to say
And the grass is growing
Underneath our feet

The words that I remember
From my childhood still are true
That there's none so blind
As those who will not see
And to those who lack the courage
And say it's dangerous to try
Well they just don't know
That love eternal will not be denied

I know you're out there somewhere
Somewhere, somewhere
I know you're out there somewhere

Somewhere you can hear my voice
I know I'll find you somehow
Somehow, somehow
I know I'll find you somehow
And somehow I'll return again to you

The Moody Blues

Are you a gutless wonder - or a Renegade Mind?

Monuments put from pen to paper,
Turns me into a gutless wonder,
And if you tolerate this,
Then your children will be next.
Gravity keeps my head down,
Or is it maybe shame ...

Manic Street Preachers

Rise like lions after slumber
In unvanquishable number.
Shake your chains to earth like dew
Which in sleep have fallen on you.
Ye are many – they are few.

Percy Shelley

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CHAPTER ONE

I'm thinking' – Oh, but *are* you?

Think for yourself and let others enjoy the privilege of doing so too
Voltaire

French-born philosopher, mathematician and scientist René Descartes became famous for his statement in Latin in the 17th century which translates into English as: 'I think, therefore I am.'

On the face of it that is true. Thought reflects perception and perception leads to both behaviour and self-identity. In that sense 'we' are what we think. But who or what is doing the thinking and is thinking the only route to perception? Clearly, as we shall see, 'we' are not always the source of 'our' perception, indeed with regard to humanity as a whole this is rarely the case; and thinking is far from the only means of perception. Thought is the village idiot compared with other expressions of consciousness that we all have the potential to access and tap into. This has to be true when we *are* those other expressions of consciousness which are infinite in nature. We have forgotten this, or, more to the point, been manipulated to forget.

These are not just the esoteric musings of the navel. The whole foundation of human control and oppression is control of perception. Once perception is hijacked then so is behaviour which is dictated by perception. Collective perception becomes collective behaviour and collective behaviour is what we call human society. Perception is all and those behind human control know that which is

why perception is the target 24/7 of the psychopathic manipulators that I call the Global Cult. They know that if they dictate perception they will dictate behaviour and collectively dictate the nature of human society. They are further aware that perception is formed from information received and if they control the circulation of information they will to a vast extent direct human behaviour. Censorship of information and opinion has become globally Nazi-like in recent years and never more blatantly than since the illusory 'virus pandemic' was triggered out of China in 2019 and across the world in 2020. Why have billions submitted to house arrest and accepted fascistic societies in a way they would have never believed possible? Those controlling the information spewing from government, mainstream media and Silicon Valley (all controlled by the same Global Cult networks) told them they were in danger from a 'deadly virus' and only by submitting to house arrest and conceding their most basic of freedoms could they and their families be protected. This monumental and provable lie became the *perception* of the billions and therefore the *behaviour* of the billions. In those few words you have the whole structure and modus operandi of human control. Fear is a perception – **F**alse **E**motion **A**ppearing **R**eal – and fear is the currency of control. In short … get them by the balls (or give them the impression that you have) and their hearts and minds will follow. Nothing grips the dangly bits and freezes the rear-end more comprehensively than fear.

World number 1

There are two 'worlds' in what appears to be one 'world' and the prime difference between them is knowledge. First we have the mass of human society in which the population is maintained in coldly-calculated ignorance through control of information and the 'education' (indoctrination) system. That's all you really need to control to enslave billions in a perceptual delusion in which what are perceived to be *their* thoughts and opinions are ever-repeated mantras that the system has been downloading all their lives through 'education', media, science, medicine, politics and academia

in which the personnel and advocates are themselves overwhelmingly the perceptual products of the same repetition. Teachers and academics in general are processed by the same programming machine as everyone else, but unlike the great majority they never leave the 'education' program. It gripped them as students and continues to grip them as programmers of subsequent generations of students. The programmed become the programmers – the programmed programmers. The same can largely be said for scientists, doctors and politicians and not least because as the American writer Upton Sinclair said: 'It is difficult to get a man to understand something when his salary depends upon his not understanding it.' If your career and income depend on thinking the way the system demands then you will – bar a few free-minded exceptions – concede your mind to the Perceptual Mainframe that I call the Postage Stamp Consensus. This is a tiny band of perceived knowledge and possibility 'taught' (downloaded) in the schools and universities, pounded out by the mainstream media and on which all government policy is founded. Try thinking, and especially speaking and acting, outside of the 'box' of consensus and see what that does for your career in the Mainstream Everything which bullies, harasses, intimidates and ridicules the population into compliance. Here we have the simple structure which enslaves most of humanity in a perceptual prison cell for an entire lifetime and I'll go deeper into this process shortly. Most of what humanity is taught as fact is nothing more than programmed belief. American science fiction author Frank Herbert was right when he said: 'Belief can be manipulated. Only knowledge is dangerous.' In the 'Covid' age belief is promoted and knowledge is censored. It was always so, but never to the extreme of today.

World number 2

A 'number 2' is slang for 'doing a poo' and how appropriate that is when this other 'world' is doing just that on humanity every minute of every day. World number 2 is a global network of secret societies and semi-secret groups dictating the direction of society via

governments, corporations and authorities of every kind. I have spent more than 30 years uncovering and exposing this network that I call the Global Cult and knowing its agenda is what has made my books so accurate in predicting current and past events. Secret societies are secret for a reason. They want to keep their hoarded knowledge to themselves and their chosen initiates and to hide it from the population which they seek through ignorance to control and subdue. The whole foundation of the division between World 1 and World 2 is *knowledge*. What number 1 knows number 2 must not. Knowledge they have worked so hard to keep secret includes (a) the agenda to enslave humanity in a centrally-controlled global dictatorship, and (b) the nature of reality and life itself. The latter (b) must be suppressed to allow the former (a) to prevail as I shall be explaining. The way the Cult manipulates and interacts with the population can be likened to a spider's web. The 'spider' sits at the centre in the shadows and imposes its will through the web with each strand represented in World number 2 by a secret society, satanic or semi-secret group, and in World number 1 – the world of the seen – by governments, agencies of government, law enforcement, corporations, the banking system, media conglomerates and Silicon Valley (Fig 1 overleaf). The spider and the web connect and coordinate all these organisations to pursue the same global outcome while the population sees them as individual entities working randomly and independently. At the level of the web governments *are* the banking system *are* the corporations *are* the media *are* Silicon Valley *are* the World Health Organization working from their inner cores as one unit. Apparently unconnected countries, corporations, institutions, organisations and people are on the *same team* pursuing the same global outcome. Strands in the web immediately around the spider are the most secretive and exclusive secret societies and their membership is emphatically restricted to the Cult inner-circle emerging through the generations from particular bloodlines for reasons I will come to. At the core of the core you would get them in a single room. That's how many people are dictating the direction of human society and its transformation

through the ‘Covid’ hoax and other means. As the web expands out from the spider we meet the secret societies that many people will be aware of – the Freemasons, Knights Templar, Knights of Malta, Opus Dei, the inner sanctum of the Jesuit Order, and such like. Note how many are connected to the Church of Rome and there is a reason for that. The Roman Church was established as a revamp, a rebranding, of the relocated ‘Church’ of Babylon and the Cult imposing global tyranny today can be tracked back to Babylon and Sumer in what is now Iraq.

Figure 1: The global web through which the few control the many. (Image Neil Hague.)

Inner levels of the web operate in the unseen away from the public eye and then we have what I call the cusp organisations located at the point where the hidden meets the seen. They include a series of satellite organisations answering to a secret society founded in London in the late 19th century called the Round Table and among them are the Royal Institute of International Affairs (UK, founded in 1920); Council on Foreign Relations (US, 1921); Bilderberg Group (worldwide, 1954); Trilateral Commission (US/worldwide, 1972); and the Club of Rome (worldwide, 1968) which was created to exploit environmental concerns to justify the centralisation of global power to ‘save the planet’. The Club of Rome instigated with others the human-caused climate change hoax which has led to all the ‘green

new deals' demanding that very centralisation of control. Cusp organisations, which include endless 'think tanks' all over the world, are designed to coordinate a single global policy between political and business leaders, intelligence personnel, media organisations and anyone who can influence the direction of policy in their own sphere of operation. Major players and regular attenders will know what is happening – or some of it – while others come and go and are kept overwhelmingly in the dark about the big picture. I refer to these cusp groupings as semi-secret in that they can be publicly identified, but what goes on at the inner-core is kept very much 'in house' even from most of their members and participants through a fiercely-imposed system of compartmentalisation. Only let them know what they need to know to serve your interests and no more. The structure of secret societies serves as a perfect example of this principle. Most Freemasons never get higher than the bottom three levels of 'degree' (degree of knowledge) when there are 33 official degrees of the Scottish Rite. Initiates only qualify for the next higher 'compartment' or degree if those at that level choose to allow them. Knowledge can be carefully assigned only to those considered 'safe'. I went to my local Freemason's lodge a few years ago when they were having an 'open day' to show how cuddly they were and when I chatted to some of them I was astonished at how little the rank and file knew even about the most ubiquitous symbols they use. The mushroom technique – keep them in the dark and feed them bullshit – applies to most people in the web as well as the population as a whole. Sub-divisions of the web mirror in theme and structure transnational corporations which have a headquarters somewhere in the world dictating to all their subsidiaries in different countries. Subsidiaries operate in their methodology and branding to the same centrally-dictated plan and policy in pursuit of particular ends. The Cult web functions in the same way. Each country has its own web as a subsidiary of the global one. They consist of networks of secret societies, semi-secret groups and bloodline families and their job is to impose the will of the spider and the global web in their particular country. Subsidiary networks control and manipulate the national political system, finance, corporations, media, medicine, etc. to

ensure that they follow the globally-dictated Cult agenda. These networks were the means through which the 'Covid' hoax could be played out with almost every country responding in the same way.

The 'Yessir' pyramid

Compartmentalisation is the key to understanding how a tiny few can dictate the lives of billions when combined with a top-down sequence of imposition and acquiescence. The inner core of the Cult sits at the peak of the pyramidal hierarchy of human society (Fig 2 overleaf). It imposes its will – its agenda for the world – on the level immediately below which acquiesces to that imposition. This level then imposes the Cult will on the level below them which acquiesces and imposes on the next level. Very quickly we meet levels in the hierarchy that have no idea there even is a Cult, but the sequence of imposition and acquiescence continues down the pyramid in just the same way. 'I don't know why we are doing this but the order came from "on-high" and so we better just do it.' Alfred Lord Tennyson said of the cannon fodder levels in his poem *The Charge of the Light Brigade*: 'Theirs not to reason why; theirs but to do and die.' The next line says that 'into the valley of death rode the six hundred' and they died because they obeyed without question what their perceived 'superiors' told them to do. In the same way the population capitulated to 'Covid'. The whole hierarchical pyramid functions like this to allow the very few to direct the enormous many. Eventually imposition-acquiescence-imposition-acquiescence comes down to the mass of the population at the foot of the pyramid. If they acquiesce to those levels of the hierarchy imposing on them (governments/law enforcement/doctors/media) a circuit is completed between the population and the handful of super-psychopaths in the Cult inner core at the top of the pyramid. Without a circuit-breaking refusal to obey, the sequence of imposition and acquiescence allows a staggeringly few people to impose their will upon the entirety of humankind. We are looking at the very sequence that has subjugated billions since the start of 2020. Our freedom has not been taken from us. Humanity has given it

away. Fascists do not impose fascism because there are not enough of them. Fascism is imposed by the population acquiescing to fascism. Put another way allowing their perceptions to be programmed to the extent that leads to the population giving their freedom away by giving their perceptions – their mind – away. If this circuit is not broken by humanity ceasing to cooperate with their own enslavement then nothing can change. For that to happen people have to critically think and see through the lies and window dressing and then summon the backbone to act upon what they see. The Cult spends its days working to stop either happening and its methodology is systematic and highly detailed, but it can be overcome and that is what this book is all about.

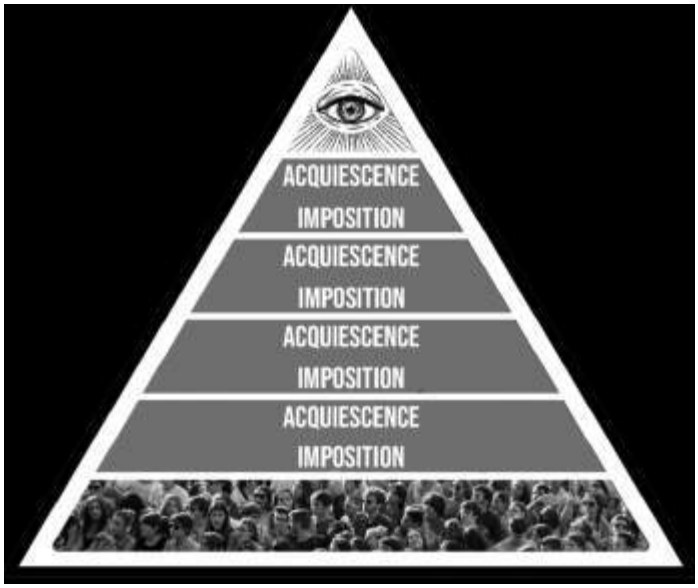

Figure 2: The simple sequence of imposition and compliance that allows a handful of people at the peak of the pyramid to dictate the lives of billions.

The Life Program

Okay, back to world number 1 or the world of the 'masses'. Observe the process of what we call 'life' and it is a perceptual download from cradle to grave. The Cult has created a global structure in which perception can be programmed and the program continually topped-up with what appears to be constant confirmation that the program is indeed true reality. The important word here is 'appears'.

This is the structure, the fly-trap, the Postage Stamp Consensus or Perceptual Mainframe, which represents that incredibly narrow band of perceived possibility delivered by the 'education' system, mainstream media, science and medicine. From the earliest age the download begins with parents who have themselves succumbed to the very programming their children are about to go through. Most parents don't do this out of malevolence and mostly it is quite the opposite. They do what they believe is best for their children and that is what the program has told them is best. Within three or four years comes the major transition from parental programming to full-blown state (Cult) programming in school, college and university where perceptually-programmed teachers and academics pass on their programming to the next generations. Teachers who resist are soon marginalised and their careers ended while children who resist are called a problem child for whom Ritalin may need to be prescribed. A few years after entering the 'world' children are under the control of authority figures representing the state telling them when they have to be there, when they can leave and when they can speak, eat, even go to the toilet. This is calculated preparation for a lifetime of obeying authority in all its forms. Reflex-action fear of authority is instilled by authority from the start. Children soon learn the carrot and stick consequences of obeying or defying authority which is underpinned daily for the rest of their life. Fortunately I daydreamed through this crap and never obeyed authority simply because it told me to. This approach to my alleged 'betters' continues to this day. There can be consequences of pursuing open-minded freedom in a world of closed-minded conformity. I spent a lot of time in school corridors after being ejected from the classroom for not taking some of it seriously and now I spend a lot of time being ejected from Facebook, YouTube and Twitter. But I can tell you that being true to yourself and not compromising your self-respect is far more exhilarating than bowing to authority for authority's sake. You don't have to be a sheep to the shepherd (authority) and the sheep dog (fear of not obeying authority).

The perceptual download continues throughout the formative years in school, college and university while script-reading 'teachers', 'academics' 'scientists', 'doctors' and 'journalists' insist that ongoing generations must be as programmed as they are. Accept the program or you will not pass your 'exams' which confirm your 'degree' of programming. It is tragic to think that many parents pressure their offspring to work hard at school to download the program and qualify for the next stage at college and university. The late, great, American comedian George Carlin said: 'Here's a bumper sticker I'd like to see: We are proud parents of a child who has resisted his teachers' attempts to break his spirit and bend him to the will of his corporate masters.' Well, the best of luck finding many of those, George. Then comes the moment to leave the formal programming years in academia and enter the 'adult' world of work. There you meet others in your chosen or prescribed arena who went through the same Postage Stamp Consensus program before you did. There is therefore overwhelming agreement between almost everyone on the basic foundations of Postage Stamp reality and the rejection, even contempt, of the few who have a mind of their own and are prepared to use it. This has two major effects. Firstly, the consensus confirms to the programmed that their download is really how things are. I mean, everyone knows that, right? Secondly, the arrogance and ignorance of Postage Stamp adherents ensure that anyone questioning the program will have unpleasant consequences for seeking their own truth and not picking their perceptions from the shelf marked: 'Things you must believe without question and if you don't you're a dangerous lunatic conspiracy theorist and a harebrained nutter'.

Every government, agency and corporation is founded on the same Postage Stamp prison cell and you can see why so many people believe the same thing while calling it their own 'opinion'. Fusion of governments and corporations in pursuit of the same agenda was the definition of fascism described by Italian dictator Benito Mussolini. The pressure to conform to perceptual norms downloaded for a lifetime is incessant and infiltrates society right

down to family groups that become censors and condemners of their own 'black sheep' for not, ironically, being sheep. We have seen an explosion of that in the 'Covid' era. Cult-owned global media unleashes its propaganda all day every day in support of the Postage Stamp and targets with abuse and ridicule anyone in the public eye who won't bend their mind to the will of the tyranny. Any response to this is denied (certainly in my case). They don't want to give a platform to expose official lies. Cult-owned-and-created Internet giants like Facebook, Google, YouTube and Twitter delete you for having an unapproved opinion. Facebook boasts that its AI censors delete 97-percent of 'hate speech' before anyone even reports it. Much of that 'hate speech' will simply be an opinion that Facebook and its masters don't want people to see. Such perceptual oppression is widely known as fascism. Even Facebook executive Benny Thomas, a 'CEO Global Planning Lead', said in comments secretly recorded by investigative journalism operation Project Veritas that Facebook is 'too powerful' and should be broken up:

I mean, no king in history has been the ruler of two billion people, but Mark Zuckerberg is … And he's 36. That's too much for a 36-year-old ... You should not have power over two billion people. I just think that's wrong.

Thomas said Facebook-owned platforms like Instagram, Oculus, and WhatsApp needed to be separate companies. 'It's too much power when they're all one together'. That's the way the Cult likes it, however. We have an executive of a Cult organisation in Benny Thomas that doesn't know there is a Cult such is the compartmentalisation. Thomas said that Facebook and Google 'are no longer companies, they're countries'. Actually they are more powerful than countries on the basis that if you control information you control perception and control human society.

I love my oppressor

Another expression of this psychological trickery is for those who realise they are being pressured into compliance to eventually

convince themselves to believe the official narratives to protect their self-respect from accepting the truth that they have succumbed to meek and subservient compliance. Such people become some of the most vehement defenders of the system. You can see them everywhere screaming abuse at those who prefer to think for themselves and by doing so reminding the compliers of their own capitulation to conformity. 'You are talking dangerous nonsense you Covidiot!!' Are you trying to convince me or yourself? It is a potent form of Stockholm syndrome which is defined as: 'A psychological condition that occurs when a victim of abuse identifies and attaches, or bonds, positively with their abuser.' An example is hostages bonding and even 'falling in love' with their kidnappers. The syndrome has been observed in domestic violence, abused children, concentration camp inmates, prisoners of war and many and various Satanic cults. These are some traits of Stockholm syndrome listed at goodtherapy.org:

- Positive regard towards perpetrators of abuse or captor [see 'Covid'].
- Failure to cooperate with police and other government authorities when it comes to holding perpetrators of abuse or kidnapping accountable [or in the case of 'Covid' cooperating with the police to enforce and defend their captors' demands].
- Little or no effort to escape [see 'Covid'].
- Belief in the goodness of the perpetrators or kidnappers [see 'Covid'].
- Appeasement of captors. This is a manipulative strategy for maintaining one's safety. As victims get rewarded – perhaps with less abuse or even with life itself – their appeasing behaviours are reinforced [see 'Covid'].
- Learned helplessness. This can be akin to 'if you can't beat 'em, join 'em'. As the victims fail to escape the abuse or captivity, they may start giving up and soon realize it's just easier for everyone if they acquiesce all their power to their captors [see 'Covid'].

- Feelings of pity toward the abusers, believing they are actually victims themselves. Because of this, victims may go on a crusade or mission to 'save' [protect] their abuser [see the venom unleashed on those challenging the official 'Covid' narrative].
- Unwillingness to learn to detach from their perpetrators and heal. In essence, victims may tend to be less loyal to themselves than to their abuser [*definitely* see 'Covid'].

Ponder on those traits and compare them with the behaviour of great swathes of the global population who have defended governments and authorities which have spent every minute destroying their lives and livelihoods and those of their children and grandchildren since early 2020 with fascistic lockdowns, house arrest and employment deletion to 'protect' them from a 'deadly virus' that their abusers' perceptually created to bring about this very outcome. We are looking at mass Stockholm syndrome. All those that agree to concede their freedom will believe those perceptions are originating in their own independent 'mind' when in fact by conceding their reality to Stockholm syndrome they have by definition conceded any independence of mind. Listen to the 'opinions' of the acquiescing masses in this 'Covid' era and what gushes forth is the repetition of the official version of everything delivered unprocessed, unfiltered and unquestioned. The whole programming dynamic works this way. I must be free because I'm told that I am and so I think that I am.

You can see what I mean with the chapter theme of 'I'm thinking – Oh, but *are* you?' The great majority are not thinking, let alone for themselves. They are repeating what authority has told them to believe which allows them to be controlled. Weaving through this mentality is the fear that the 'conspiracy theorists' are right and this again explains the often hysterical abuse that ensues when you dare to contest the official narrative of anything. Denial is the mechanism of hiding from yourself what you don't want to be true. Telling people what they want to hear is easy, but it's an infinitely greater challenge to tell them what they would rather not be happening.

One is akin to pushing against an open door while the other is met with vehement resistance no matter what the scale of evidence. I don't want it to be true so I'll convince myself that it's not. Examples are everywhere from the denial that a partner is cheating despite all the signs to the reflex-action rejection of any idea that world events in which country after country act in exactly the same way are centrally coordinated. To accept the latter is to accept that a force of unspeakable evil is working to destroy your life and the lives of your children with nothing too horrific to achieve that end. Who the heck wants that to be true? But if we don't face reality the end is duly achieved and the consequences are far worse and ongoing than breaking through the walls of denial today with the courage to make a stand against tyranny.

Connect the dots – but how?

A crucial aspect of perceptual programming is to portray a world in which everything is random and almost nothing is connected to anything else. Randomness cannot be coordinated by its very nature and once you perceive events as random the idea they could be connected is waved away as the rantings of the tinfoil-hat brigade. You can't plan and coordinate random you idiot! No, you can't, but you can hide the coldly-calculated and long-planned behind the *illusion* of randomness. A foundation manifestation of the Renegade Mind is to scan reality for patterns that connect the apparently random and turn pixels and dots into pictures. This is the way I work and have done so for more than 30 years. You look for similarities in people, modus operandi and desired outcomes and slowly, then ever quicker, the picture forms. For instance: There would seem to be no connection between the 'Covid pandemic' hoax and the human-caused global-warming hoax and yet they are masks (appropriately) on the same face seeking the same outcome. Those pushing the global warming myth through the Club of Rome and other Cult agencies are driving the lies about 'Covid' – Bill Gates is an obvious one, but they are endless. Why would the same people be involved in both when they are clearly not connected? Oh, but they

are. Common themes with personnel are matched by common goals. The 'solutions' to both 'problems' are centralisation of global power to impose the will of the few on the many to 'save' humanity from 'Covid' and save the planet from an 'existential threat' (we need 'zero Covid' and 'zero carbon emissions'). These, in turn, connect with the 'dot' of globalisation which was coined to describe the centralisation of global power in every area of life through incessant political and corporate expansion, trading blocks and superstates like the European Union. If you are the few and you want to control the many you have to centralise power and decision-making. The more you centralise power the more power the few at the centre will have over the many; and the more that power is centralised the more power those at the centre have to centralise even quicker. The momentum of centralisation gets faster and faster which is exactly the process we have witnessed. In this way the hoaxed 'pandemic' and the fakery of human-caused global warming serve the interests of globalisation and the seizure of global power in the hands of the Cult inner-circle which is behind 'Covid', 'climate change' *and* globalisation. At this point random 'dots' become a clear and obvious picture or pattern.

Klaus Schwab, the classic Bond villain who founded the Cult's Gates-funded World Economic Forum, published a book in 2020, *The Great Reset*, in which he used the 'problem' of 'Covid' to justify a total transformation of human society to 'save' humanity from 'climate change'. Schwab said: 'The pandemic represents a rare but narrow window of opportunity to reflect, reimagine, and reset our world.' What he didn't mention is that the Cult he serves is behind both hoaxes as I show in my book *The Answer*. He and the Cult don't have to reimagine the world. They know precisely what they want and that's why they destroyed human society with 'Covid' to 'build back better' in their grand design. Their job is not to imagine, but to get humanity to imagine and agree with their plans while believing it's all random. It must be pure coincidence that 'The Great Reset' has long been the Cult's code name for the global imposition of fascism and replaced previous code-names of the 'New World

Order' used by Cult frontmen like Father George Bush and the 'New Order of the Ages' which emerged from Freemasonry and much older secret societies. New Order of the Ages appears on the reverse of the Great Seal of the United States as 'Novus ordo seclorum' underneath the Cult symbol used since way back of the pyramid and all seeing-eye (Fig 3). The pyramid is the hierarchy of human control headed by the illuminated eye that symbolises the force behind the Cult which I will expose in later chapters. The term 'Annuit Coeptis' translates as 'He favours our undertaking'. We are told the 'He' is the Christian god, but 'He' is not as I will be explaining.

Figure 3: The all-seeing eye of the Cult 'god' on the Freemason-designed Great Seal of the United States and also on the dollar bill.

Having you on

Two major Cult techniques of perceptual manipulation that relate to all this are what I have called since the 1990s Problem-Reaction-Solution (PRS) and the Totalitarian Tiptoe (TT). They can be uncovered by the inquiring mind with a simple question: Who benefits? The answer usually identifies the perpetrators of a given action or happening through the concept of 'he who most benefits from a crime is the one most likely to have committed it'. The Latin 'Cue bono?' – Who benefits? – is widely attributed to the Roman orator and statesman Marcus Tullius Cicero. No wonder it goes back so far when the concept has been relevant to human behaviour since

history was recorded. Problem-Reaction-Solution is the technique used to manipulate us every day by covertly creating a problem (or the illusion of one) and offering the solution to the problem (or the illusion of one). In the first phase you create the problem and blame someone or something else for why it has happened. This may relate to a financial collapse, terrorist attack, war, global warming or pandemic, anything in fact that will allow you to impose the 'solution' to change society in the way you desire at that time. The 'problem' doesn't have to be real. PRS is manipulation of perception and all you need is the population to believe the problem is real. Human-caused global warming and the 'Covid pandemic' only have to be *perceived* to be real for the population to accept the 'solutions' of authority. I refer to this technique as NO-Problem-Reaction-Solution. Billions did not meekly accept house arrest from early 2020 because there was a real deadly 'Covid pandemic' but because they perceived – believed – that to be the case. The antidote to Problem-Reaction-Solution is to ask who benefits from the proposed solution. Invariably it will be anyone who wants to justify more control through deletion of freedom and centralisation of power and decision-making.

The two world wars were Problem-Reaction-Solutions that transformed and realigned global society. Both were manipulated into being by the Cult as I have detailed in books since the mid-1990s. They dramatically centralised global power, especially World War Two, which led to the United Nations and other global bodies thanks to the overt and covert manipulations of the Rockefeller family and other Cult bloodlines like the Rothschilds. The UN is a stalking horse for full-blown world government that I will come to shortly. The land on which the UN building stands in New York was donated by the Rockefellers and the same Cult family was behind Big Pharma scalpel and drug 'medicine' and the creation of the World Health Organization as part of the UN. They have been stalwarts of the eugenics movement and funded Hitler's race-purity expert' Ernst Rudin. The human-caused global warming hoax has been orchestrated by the Club of Rome through the UN which is

manufacturing both the 'problem' through its Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change and imposing the 'solution' through its Agenda 21 and Agenda 2030 which demand the total centralisation of global power to 'save the world' from a climate hoax the United Nations is itself perpetrating. What a small world the Cult can be seen to be particularly among the inner circles. The bedfellow of Problem-Reaction-Solution is the Totalitarian Tiptoe which became the Totalitarian Sprint in 2020. The technique is fashioned to hide the carefully-coordinated behind the cover of apparently random events. You start the sequence at 'A' and you know you are heading for 'Z'. You don't want people to know that and each step on the journey is presented as a random happening while all the steps strung together lead in the same direction. The speed may have quickened dramatically in recent times, but you can still see the incremental approach of the Tiptoe in the case of 'Covid' as each new imposition takes us deeper into fascism. Tell people they have to do this or that to get back to 'normal', then this and this and this. With each new demand adding to the ones that went before the population's freedom is deleted until it disappears. The spider wraps its web around the flies more comprehensively with each new diktat. I'll highlight this in more detail when I get to the 'Covid' hoax and how it has been pulled off. Another prime example of the Totalitarian Tiptoe is how the Cult-created European Union went from a 'free-trade zone' to a centralised bureaucratic dictatorship through the Tiptoe of incremental centralisation of power until nations became mere administrative units for Cult-owned dark suits in Brussels.

The antidote to ignorance is knowledge which the Cult seeks vehemently to deny us, but despite the systematic censorship to that end the Renegade Mind can overcome this by vociferously seeking out the facts no matter the impediments put in the way. There is also a method of thinking and perceiving – *knowing* – that doesn't even need names, dates, place-type facts to identify the patterns that reveal the story. I'll get to that in the final chapter. All you need to know about the manipulation of human society and to what end is still out there – *at the time of writing* – in the form of books, videos

and websites for those that really want to breach the walls of programmed perception. To access this knowledge requires the abandonment of the mainstream media as a source of information in the awareness that this is owned and controlled by the Cult and therefore promotes mass perceptions that suit the Cult. Mainstream media lies all day, every day. That is its function and very reason for being. Where it does tell the truth, here and there, is only because the truth and the Cult agenda very occasionally coincide. If you look for fact and insight to the BBC, CNN and virtually all the rest of them you are asking to be conned and perceptually programmed.

Know the outcome and you'll see the journey

Events seem random when you have no idea where the world is being taken. Once you do the random becomes the carefully planned. Know the outcome and you'll see the journey is a phrase I have been using for a long time to give context to daily happenings that appear unconnected. Does a problem, or illusion of a problem, trigger a proposed 'solution' that further drives society in the direction of the outcome? Invariably the answer will be yes and the random – *abracadabra* – becomes the clearly coordinated. So what is this outcome that unlocks the door to a massively expanded understanding of daily events? I will summarise its major aspects – the fine detail is in my other books – and those new to this information will see that the world they thought they were living in is a very different place. The foundation of the Cult agenda is the incessant centralisation of power and all such centralisation is ultimately in pursuit of Cult control on a global level. I have described for a long time the planned world structure of top-down dictatorship as the Hunger Games Society. The term obviously comes from the movie series which portrayed a world in which a few living in military-protected hi-tech luxury were the overlords of a population condemned to abject poverty in isolated 'sectors' that were not allowed to interact. 'Covid' lockdowns and travel bans anyone? The 'Hunger Games' pyramid of structural control has the inner circle of the Cult at the top with pretty much the entire

population at the bottom under their control through dependency for survival on the Cult. The whole structure is planned to be protected and enforced by a military-police state (Fig 4).

Here you have the reason for the global lockdowns of the fake pandemic to coldly destroy independent incomes and livelihoods and make everyone dependent on the 'state' (the Cult that controls the 'states'). I have warned in my books for many years about the plan to introduce a 'guaranteed income' – a barely survivable pittance – designed to impose dependency when employment was destroyed by AI technology and now even more comprehensively at great speed by the 'Covid' scam. Once the pandemic was played and lockdown consequences began to delete independent income the authorities began to talk right on cue about the need for a guaranteed income and a 'Great Reset'. Guaranteed income will be presented as benevolent governments seeking to help a desperate people – desperate as a direct result of actions of the same governments. The truth is that such payments are a trap. You will only get them if you do exactly what the authorities demand including mass vaccination (genetic manipulation). We have seen this theme already in Australia where those dependent on government benefits have them reduced if parents don't agree to have their children vaccinated according to an insane health-destroying government-dictated schedule. Calculated economic collapse applies to governments as well as people. The Cult wants rid of countries through the creation of a world state with countries broken up into regions ruled by a world government and super states like the European Union. Countries must be bankrupted, too, to this end and it's being achieved by the trillions in 'rescue packages' and furlough payments, trillions in lost taxation, and money-no-object spending on 'Covid' including constant all-medium advertising (programming) which has made the media dependent on government for much of its income. The day of reckoning is coming – as planned – for government spending and given that it has been made possible by printing money and not by production/taxation there is inflation on the way that has the

potential to wipe out monetary value. In that case there will be no need for the Cult to steal your money. It just won't be worth anything (see the German Weimar Republic before the Nazis took over). Many have been okay with lockdowns while getting a percentage of their income from so-called furlough payments without having to work. Those payments are dependent, however, on people having at least a theoretical job with a business considered non-essential and ordered to close. As these business go under because they are closed by lockdown after lockdown the furlough stops and it will for everyone eventually. Then what? The 'then what?' is precisely the idea.

THE COVID-19 CREATED HUNGER GAMES SOCIETY
THE ELITE - 1%
THE GLOBAL POLICE STATE
MANDATORY VACCINATION - ID - SOCIAL CREDIT - 666
CLOSED
FOOD BANK
THE MASSES LIVING IN POVERTY

Figure 4: The Hunger Games Society structure I have long warned was planned and now the 'Covid' hoax has made it possible. This is the real reason for lockdowns.

Hired hands

Between the Hunger Games Cult elite and the dependent population is planned to be a vicious military-police state (a fusion of the two into one force). This has been in the making for a long time with police looking ever more like the military and carrying weapons to match. The pandemic scam has seen this process accelerate so fast as

lockdown house arrest is brutally enforced by carefully recruited fascist minds and gormless system-servers. The police and military are planned to merge into a centrally-directed world army in a global structure headed by a world government which wouldn't be elected even by the election fixes now in place. The world army is not planned even to be human and instead wars would be fought, primarily against the population, using robot technology controlled by artificial intelligence. I have been warning about this for decades and now militaries around the world are being transformed by this very AI technology. The global regime that I describe is a particular form of fascism known as a technocracy in which decisions are not made by clueless and co-opted politicians but by unelected technocrats – scientists, engineers, technologists and bureaucrats. Cult-owned-and-controlled Silicon Valley giants are examples of technocracy and they already have far more power to direct world events than governments. They are with their censorship *selecting* governments. I know that some are calling the 'Great Reset' a Marxist communist takeover, but fascism and Marxism are different labels for the same tyranny. Tell those who lived in fascist Germany and Stalinist Russia that there was a difference in the way their freedom was deleted and their lives controlled. I could call it a fascist technocracy or a Marxist technocracy and they would be equally accurate. The Hunger Games society with its world government structure would oversee a world army, world central bank and single world cashless currency imposing its will on a microchipped population (Fig 5). Scan its different elements and see how the illusory pandemic is forcing society in this very direction at great speed. Leaders of 23 countries and the World Health Organization (WHO) backed the idea in March, 2021, of a global treaty for 'international cooperation' in 'health emergencies' and nations should 'come together as a global community for peaceful cooperation that extends beyond this crisis'. Cut the Orwellian bullshit and this means another step towards global government. The plan includes a cashless digital money system that I first warned about in 1993. Right at the start of 'Covid' the deeply corrupt Tedros

Adhanom Ghebreyesus, the crooked and merely gofer 'head' of the World Health Organization, said it was possible to catch the 'virus' by touching cash and it was better to use cashless means. The claim was ridiculous nonsense and like the whole 'Covid' mind-trick it was nothing to do with 'health' and everything to do with pushing every aspect of the Cult agenda. As a result of the Tedros lie the use of cash has plummeted. The Cult script involves a single world digital currency that would eventually be technologically embedded in the body. China is a massive global centre for the Cult and if you watch what is happening there you will know what is planned for everywhere. The Chinese government is developing a digital currency which would allow fines to be deducted immediately via AI for anyone caught on camera breaking its fantastic list of laws and the money is going to be programmable with an expiry date to ensure that no one can accrue wealth except the Cult and its operatives.

WORLD GOVERNMENT
UNELECTED - RUN BY TECHNOCRATS
WORLD ARMY • CENTRAL BANK • CURRENCY •
HUMANS CONNECTED TO A.I.
SUPERSTATES LIKE THE EU AND CENTRALLY
CONTROLLED 'TRADING BLOCS'
COUNTRIES REPLACED BY POWERLESS REGIONS
GLOBAL MONOCULTURE
THE PEOPLE

Figure 5: The structure of global control the Cult has been working towards for so long and this has been enormously advanced by the 'Covid' illusion.

Serfdom is so smart

The Cult plan is far wider, extreme, and more comprehensive than even most conspiracy researchers appreciate and I will come to the true depths of deceit and control in the chapters 'Who controls the

Cult?' and 'Escaping Wetiko'. Even the world that we know is crazy enough. We are being deluged with ever more sophisticated and controlling technology under the heading of 'smart'. We have smart televisions, smart meters, smart cards, smart cars, smart driving, smart roads, smart pills, smart patches, smart watches, smart skin, smart borders, smart pavements, smart streets, smart cities, smart communities, smart environments, smart growth, smart planet ... smart *everything* around us. Smart technologies and methods of operation are designed to interlock to create a global Smart Grid connecting the entirety of human society including human minds to create a centrally-dictated 'hive' mind. 'Smart cities' is code for densely-occupied megacities of total surveillance and control through AI. Ever more destructive frequency communication systems like 5G have been rolled out without any official testing for health and psychological effects (colossal). 5G/6G/7G systems are needed to run the Smart Grid and each one becomes more destructive of body and mind. Deleting independent income is crucial to forcing people into these AI-policed prisons by ending private property ownership (except for the Cult elite). The Cult's Great Reset now openly foresees a global society in which no one will own any possessions and everything will be rented while the Cult would own literally everything under the guise of government and corporations. The aim has been to use the lockdowns to destroy sources of income on a mass scale and when the people are destitute and in unrepayable amounts of debt (problem) Cult assets come forward with the pledge to write-off debt in return for handing over all property and possessions (solution). Everything – literally everything including people – would be connected to the Internet via AI. I was warning years ago about the coming Internet of Things (IoT) in which all devices and technology from your car to your fridge would be plugged into the Internet and controlled by AI. Now we are already there with much more to come. The next stage is the Internet of Everything (IoE) which is planned to include the connection of AI to the human brain and body to replace the human mind with a centrally-controlled AI mind. Instead of perceptions

being manipulated through control of information and censorship those perceptions would come direct from the Cult through AI. What do you think? You think whatever AI decides that you think. In human terms there would be no individual 'think' any longer. Too incredible? The ravings of a lunatic? Not at all. Cult-owned crazies in Silicon Valley have been telling us the plan for years without explaining the real motivation and calculated implications. These include Google executive and 'futurist' Ray Kurzweil who highlights the year 2030 for when this would be underway. He said:

Our thinking ... will be a hybrid of biological and non-biological thinking ... humans will be able to extend their limitations and 'think in the cloud' ... We're going to put gateways to the cloud in our brains ... We're going to gradually merge and enhance ourselves ... In my view, that's the nature of being human – we transcend our limitations.

As the technology becomes vastly superior to what we are then the small proportion that is still human gets smaller and smaller and smaller until it's just utterly negligible.

The sales-pitch of Kurzweil and Cult-owned Silicon Valley is that this would make us 'super-human' when the real aim is to make us post-human and no longer 'human' in the sense that we have come to know. The entire global population would be connected to AI and become the centrally-controlled 'hive-mind' of externally-delivered perceptions. The Smart Grid being installed to impose the Cult's will on the world is being constructed to allow particular locations – even one location – to control the whole global system. From these prime control centres, which absolutely include China and Israel, anything connected to the Internet would be switched on or off and manipulated at will. Energy systems could be cut, communication via the Internet taken down, computer-controlled driverless autonomous vehicles driven off the road, medical devices switched off, the potential is limitless given how much AI and Internet connections now run human society. We have seen nothing yet if we allow this to continue. Autonomous vehicle makers are working with law enforcement to produce cars designed to automatically pull over if they detect a police or emergency vehicle flashing from up to 100 feet away. At a police stop the car would be unlocked and the

window rolled down automatically. Vehicles would only take you where the computer (the state) allowed. The end of petrol vehicles and speed limiters on all new cars in the UK and EU from 2022 are steps leading to electric computerised transport over which ultimately you have no control. The picture is far bigger even than the Cult global network or web and that will become clear when I get to the nature of the 'spider'. There is a connection between all these happenings and the instigation of DNA-manipulating 'vaccines' (which aren't 'vaccines') justified by the 'Covid' hoax. That connection is the unfolding plan to transform the human body from a biological to a synthetic biological state and this is why synthetic biology is such a fast-emerging discipline of mainstream science. 'Covid vaccines' are infusing self-replicating synthetic genetic material into the cells to cumulatively take us on the Totalitarian Tiptoe from Human 1.0 to the synthetic biological Human 2.0 which will be physically and perceptually attached to the Smart Grid to one hundred percent control every thought, perception and deed. Humanity needs to wake up and *fast*.

This is the barest explanation of where the 'outcome' is planned to go but it's enough to see the journey happening all around us. Those new to this information will already see 'Covid' in a whole new context. I will add much more detail as we go along, but for the minutiae evidence see my mega-works, *The Answer, The Trigger* and *Everything You Need to Know But Have Never Been Told*.

Now – how does a Renegade Mind see the 'world'?

CHAPTER TWO

Renegade Perception

It is one thing to be clever and another to be wise
George R.R. Martin

A simple definition of the difference between a programmed mind and a Renegade Mind would be that one sees only dots while the other connects them to see the picture. Reading reality with accuracy requires the observer to (a) know the planned outcome and (b) realise that everything, but *everything*, is connected.

The entirety of infinite reality is connected – that's its very nature – and with human society an expression of infinite reality the same must apply. Simple cause and effect is a connection. The effect is triggered by the cause and the effect then becomes the cause of another effect. Nothing happens in isolation because it *can't*. Life in whatever reality is simple choice and consequence. We make choices and these lead to consequences. If we don't like the consequences we can make different choices and get different consequences which lead to other choices and consequences. The choice and the consequence are not only connected they are indivisible. You can't have one without the other as an old song goes. A few cannot control the world unless those being controlled allow that to happen – cause and effect, choice and consequence. Control – who has it and who doesn't – is a two-way process, a symbiotic relationship, involving the controller and controlled. 'They took my freedom away!!' Well, yes, but you also gave it to them. Humanity is

subjected to mass control because humanity has acquiesced to that control. This is all cause and effect and literally a case of give and take. In the same way world events of every kind are connected and the Cult works incessantly to sell the illusion of the random and coincidental to maintain the essential (to them) perception of dots that hide the picture. Renegade Minds know this and constantly scan the world for patterns of connection. This is absolutely pivotal in understanding the happenings in the world and without that perspective clarity is impossible. First you know the planned outcome and then you identify the steps on the journey – the day-by-day apparently random which, when connected in relation to the outcome, no longer appear as individual events, but as the proverbial *chain* of events leading in the same direction. I'll give you some examples:

Political puppet show

We are told to believe that politics is 'adversarial' in that different parties with different beliefs engage in an endless tussle for power. There may have been some truth in that up to a point – and only a point – but today divisions between 'different' parties are rhetorical not ideological. Even the rhetorical is fusing into one-speak as the parties eject any remaining free thinkers while others succumb to the ever-gathering intimidation of anyone with the 'wrong' opinion. The Cult is not a new phenomenon and can be traced back thousands of years as my books have documented. Its intergenerational initiates have been manipulating events with increasing effect the more that global power has been centralised. In ancient times the Cult secured control through the system of monarchy in which 'special' bloodlines (of which more later) demanded the right to rule as kings and queens simply by birthright and by vanquishing others who claimed the same birthright. There came a time, however, when people had matured enough to see the unfairness of such tyranny and demanded a say in who governed them. Note the word – *governed* them. Not served them – *governed* them, hence government defined as 'the political direction and control exercised over the

actions of the members, citizens, or inhabitants of communities, societies, and states; direction of the affairs of a state, community, etc.' Governments exercise control over rather than serve just like the monarchies before them. Bizarrely there are still countries like the United Kingdom which are ruled by a monarch *and* a government that officially answers to the monarch. The UK head of state and that of Commonwealth countries such as Canada, Australia and New Zealand is 'selected' by who in a *single family* had unprotected sex with whom and in what order. Pinch me it can't be true. Ouch! Shit, it is. The demise of monarchies in most countries offered a potential vacuum in which some form of free and fair society could arise and the Cult had that base covered. Monarchies had served its interests but they couldn't continue in the face of such widespread opposition and, anyway, replacing a 'royal' dictatorship that people could see with a dictatorship 'of the people' hiding behind the concept of 'democracy' presented far greater manipulative possibilities and ways of hiding coordinated tyranny behind the illusion of 'freedom'.

Democracy is quite wrongly defined as government selected by the population. This is not the case at all. It is government selected by *some* of the population (and then only in theory). This 'some' doesn't even have to be the majority as we have seen so often in first-past-the-post elections in which the so-called majority party wins fewer votes than the 'losing' parties combined. Democracy can give total power to a party in government from a minority of the votes cast. It's a sleight of hand to sell tyranny as freedom. Seventy-four million Trump-supporting Americans didn't vote for the 'Democratic' Party of Joe Biden in the distinctly dodgy election in 2020 and yet far from acknowledging the wishes and feelings of that great percentage of American society the Cult-owned Biden government set out from day one to destroy them and their right to a voice and opinion. Empty shell Biden and his Cult handlers said they were doing this to 'protect democracy'. Such is the level of lunacy and sickness to which politics has descended. Connect the dots and relate them to the desired outcome – a world government run by self-appointed technocrats and no longer even elected

politicians. While operating through its political agents in government the Cult is at the same time encouraging public distain for politicians by putting idiots and incompetents in theoretical power on the road to deleting them. The idea is to instil a public reaction that says of the technocrats: 'Well, they couldn't do any worse than the pathetic politicians.' It's all about controlling perception and Renegade Minds can see through that while programmed minds cannot when they are ignorant of both the planned outcome and the manipulation techniques employed to secure that end. This knowledge can be learned, however, and fast if people choose to get informed.

Politics may at first sight appear very difficult to control from a central point. I mean look at the 'different' parties and how would you be able to oversee them all and their constituent parts? In truth, it's very straightforward because of their structure. We are back to the pyramid of imposition and acquiescence. Organisations are structured in the same way as the system as a whole. Political parties are not open forums of free expression. They are hierarchies. I was a national spokesman for the British Green Party which claimed to be a different kind of politics in which influence and power was devolved; but I can tell you from direct experience – and it's far worse now – that Green parties are run as hierarchies like all the others however much they may try to hide that fact or kid themselves that it's not true. A very few at the top of all political parties are directing policy and personnel. They decide if you are elevated in the party or serve as a government minister and to do that you have to be a yes man or woman. Look at all the maverick political thinkers who never ascended the greasy pole. If you want to progress within the party or reach 'high-office' you need to fall into line and conform. Exceptions to this are rare indeed. Should you want to run for parliament or Congress you have to persuade the local or state level of the party to select you and for that you need to play the game as dictated by the hierarchy. If you secure election and wish to progress within the greater structure you need to go on conforming to what is acceptable to those running the hierarchy

from the peak of the pyramid. Political parties are perceptual gulags and the very fact that there are party 'Whips' appointed to 'whip' politicians into voting the way the hierarchy demands exposes the ridiculous idea that politicians are elected to serve the people they are supposed to represent. Cult operatives and manipulation has long seized control of major parties that have any chance of forming a government and at least most of those that haven't. A new party forms and the Cult goes to work to infiltrate and direct. This has reached such a level today that you see video compilations of 'leaders' of all parties whether Democrats, Republicans, Conservative, Labour and Green parroting the same Cult mantra of 'Build Back Better' and the 'Great Reset' which are straight off the Cult song-sheet to describe the transformation of global society in response to the Cult-instigated hoaxes of the 'Covid pandemic' and human-caused 'climate change'. To see Caroline Lucas, the Green Party MP that I knew when I was in the party in the 1980s, speaking in support of plans proposed by Cult operative Klaus Schwab representing the billionaire global elite is a real head-shaker.

Many parties – one master

The party system is another mind-trick and was instigated to change the nature of the dictatorship by swapping 'royalty' for dark suits that people believed – though now ever less so – represented their interests. Understanding this trick is to realise that a single force (the Cult) controls all parties either directly in terms of the major ones or through manipulation of perception and ideology with others. You don't need to manipulate Green parties to demand your transformation of society in the name of 'climate change' when they are obsessed with the lie that this is essential to 'save the planet'. You just give them a platform and away they go serving your interests while believing they are being environmentally virtuous. America's political structure is a perfect blueprint for how the two or multi-party system is really a one-party state. The Republican Party is controlled from one step back in the shadows by a group made up of billionaires and their gofers known as neoconservatives or Neocons.

I have exposed them in fine detail in my books and they were the driving force behind the policies of the imbecilic presidency of Boy George Bush which included 9/11 (see *The Trigger* for a comprehensive demolition of the official story), the subsequent 'war on terror' (war *of* terror) and the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. The latter was a No-Problem-Reaction-Solution based on claims by Cult operatives, including Bush and British Prime Minister Tony Blair, about Saddam Hussein's 'weapons of mass destruction' which did not exist as war criminals Bush and Blair well knew.

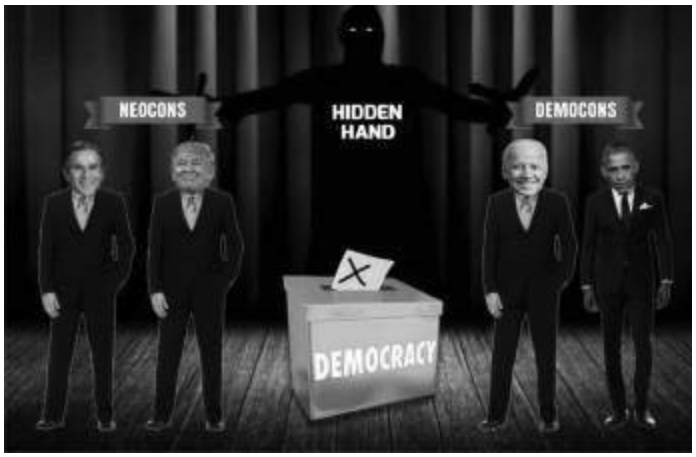

Figure 6: Different front people, different parties – same control system.

The Democratic Party has its own 'Neocon' group controlling from the background which I call the 'Democons' and here's the penny-drop – the Neocons and Democons answer to the same masters one step further back into the shadows (Fig 6). At that level of the Cult the Republican and Democrat parties are controlled by the same people and no matter which is in power the Cult is in power. This is how it works in almost every country and certainly in Britain with Conservative, Labour, Liberal Democrat and Green parties now all on the same page whatever the rhetoric may be in their feeble attempts to appear different. Neocons operated at the time of Bush through a think tank called The Project for the New American Century which in September, 2000, published a document entitled *Rebuilding America's Defenses: Strategies, Forces, and Resources*

For a New Century demanding that America fight 'multiple, simultaneous major theatre wars' as a 'core mission' to force regime-change in countries including Iraq, Libya and Syria. Neocons arranged for Bush ('Republican') and Blair ('Labour Party') to front-up the invasion of Iraq and when they departed the Democons orchestrated the targeting of Libya and Syria through Barack Obama ('Democrat') and British Prime Minister David Cameron ('Conservative Party'). We have 'different' parties and 'different' people, but the same unfolding script. The more the Cult has seized the reigns of parties and personnel the more their policies have transparently pursued the same agenda to the point where the fascist 'Covid' impositions of the Conservative junta of Jackboot Johnson in Britain were opposed by the Labour Party because they were not fascist enough. The Labour Party is likened to the US Democrats while the Conservative Party is akin to a British version of the Republicans and on both sides of the Atlantic they all speak the same language and support the direction demanded by the Cult although some more enthusiastically than others. It's a similar story in country after country because it's all centrally controlled. Oh, but what about Trump? I'll come to him shortly. Political 'choice' in the 'party' system goes like this: You vote for Party A and they get into government. You don't like what they do so next time you vote for Party B and they get into government. You don't like what they do when it's pretty much the same as Party A and why wouldn't that be with both controlled by the same force? Given that only two, sometimes three, parties have any chance of forming a government to get rid of Party B that you don't like you have to vote again for Party A which … you don't like. This, ladies and gentlemen, is what they call 'democracy' which we are told – wrongly – is a term interchangeable with 'freedom'.

The cult of cults

At this point I need to introduce a major expression of the Global Cult known as Sabbatian-Frankism. Sabbatian is also spelt as Sabbatean. I will summarise here. I have published major exposés

and detailed background in other works. Sabbatian-Frankism combines the names of two frauds posing as 'Jewish' men, Sabbatai Zevi (1626-1676), a rabbi, black magician and occultist who proclaimed he was the Jewish messiah; and Jacob Frank (1726-1791), the Polish 'Jew', black magician and occultist who said he was the reincarnation of 'messiah' Zevi and biblical patriarch Jacob. They worked across two centuries to establish the Sabbatian-Frankist cult that plays a major, indeed central, role in the manipulation of human society by the Global Cult which has its origins much further back in history than Sabbatai Zevi. I should emphasise two points here in response to the shrill voices that will scream 'anti-Semitism': (1) Sabbatian-Frankists are NOT Jewish and only pose as such to hide their cult behind a Jewish façade; and (2) my information about this cult has come from Jewish sources who have long realised that their society and community has been infiltrated and taken over by interloper Sabbatian-Frankists. Infiltration has been the foundation technique of Sabbatian-Frankism from its official origin in the 17th century. Zevi's Sabbatian sect attracted a massive following described as the biggest messianic movement in Jewish history, spreading as far as Africa and Asia, and he promised a return for the Jews to the 'Promised Land' of Israel. Sabbatianism was not Judaism but an inversion of everything that mainstream Judaism stood for. So much so that this sinister cult would have a feast day when Judaism had a fast day and whatever was forbidden in Judaism the Sabbatians were encouraged and even commanded to do. This included incest and what would be today called Satanism. Members were forbidden to marry outside the sect and there was a system of keeping their children ignorant of what they were part of until they were old enough to be trusted not to unknowingly reveal anything to outsiders. The same system is employed to this day by the Global Cult in general which Sabbatian-Frankism has enormously influenced and now largely controls.

Zevi and his Sabbatians suffered a setback with the intervention by the Sultan of the Islamic Ottoman Empire in the Middle East and what is now the Republic of Turkey where Zevi was located. The

Sultan gave him the choice of proving his 'divinity', converting to Islam or facing torture and death. Funnily enough Zevi chose to convert or at least appear to. Some of his supporters were disillusioned and drifted away, but many did not with 300 families also converting – only in theory – to Islam. They continued behind this Islamic smokescreen to follow the goals, rules and rituals of Sabbatianism and became known as 'crypto-Jews' or the 'Dönmeh' which means 'to turn'. This is rather ironic because they didn't 'turn' and instead hid behind a fake Islamic persona. The process of appearing to be one thing while being very much another would become the calling card of Sabbatianism especially after Zevi's death and the arrival of the Satanist Jacob Frank in the 18th century when the cult became Sabbatian-Frankism and plumbed still new depths of depravity and infiltration which included – still includes – human sacrifice and sex with children. Wherever Sabbatians go paedophilia and Satanism follow and is it really a surprise that Hollywood is so infested with child abuse and Satanism when it was established by Sabbatian-Frankists and is still controlled by them? Hollywood has been one of the prime vehicles for global perceptual programming and manipulation. How many believe the version of 'history' portrayed in movies when it is a travesty and inversion (again) of the truth? Rabbi Marvin Antelman describes Frankism in his book, *To Eliminate the Opiate*, as 'a movement of complete evil' while Jewish professor Gershom Scholem said of Frank in *The Messianic Idea in Judaism*: 'In all his actions [he was] a truly corrupt and degenerate individual ... one of the most frightening phenomena in the whole of Jewish history.' Frank was excommunicated by traditional rabbis, as was Zevi, but Frank was undeterred and enjoyed vital support from the House of Rothschild, the infamous banking dynasty whose inner-core are Sabbatian-Frankists and not Jews. Infiltration of the Roman Church and Vatican was instigated by Frank with many Dönmeh 'turning' again to convert to Roman Catholicism with a view to hijacking the reins of power. This was the ever-repeating modus operandi and continues to be so. Pose as an advocate of the religion, culture or country that you want to control and then

manipulate your people into the positions of authority and influence largely as advisers, administrators and Svengalis for those that appear to be in power. They did this with Judaism, Christianity (Christian Zionism is part of this), Islam and other religions and nations until Sabbatian-Frankism spanned the world as it does today.

Sabbatian Saudis and the terror network

One expression of the Sabbatian-Frankist Dönmeh within Islam is the ruling family of Saudi Arabia, the House of Saud, through which came the vile distortion of Islam known as Wahhabism. This is the violent creed followed by terrorist groups like Al-Qaeda and ISIS or Islamic State. Wahhabism is the hand-chopping, head-chopping 'religion' of Saudi Arabia which is used to keep the people in a constant state of fear so the interloper House of Saud can continue to rule. Al-Qaeda and Islamic State were lavishly funded by the House of Saud while being created and directed by the Sabbatian-Frankist network in the United States that operates through the Pentagon, CIA and the government in general of whichever 'party'. The front man for the establishment of Wahhabism in the middle of the 18th century was a Sabbatian-Frankist 'crypto-Jew' posing as Islamic called Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab. His daughter would marry the son of Muhammad bin Saud who established the first Saudi state before his death in 1765 with support from the British Empire. Bin Saud's successors would establish modern Saudi Arabia in league with the British and Americans in 1932 which allowed them to seize control of Islam's major shrines in Mecca and Medina. They have dictated the direction of Sunni Islam ever since while Iran is the major centre of the Shiite version and here we have the source of at least the public conflict between them. The Sabbatian network has used its Wahhabi extremists to carry out Problem-Reaction-Solution terrorist attacks in the name of 'Al-Qaeda' and 'Islamic State' to justify a devastating 'war on terror', ever-increasing surveillance of the population and to terrify people into compliance. Another insight of the Renegade Mind is the streetwise understanding that

just because a country, location or people are attacked doesn't mean that those apparently representing that country, location or people are not behind the attackers. Often they are *orchestrating* the attacks because of the societal changes that can be then justified in the name of 'saving the population from terrorists'.

I show in great detail in *The Trigger* how Sabbatian-Frankists were the real perpetrators of 9/11 and not '19 Arab hijackers' who were blamed for what happened. Observe what was justified in the name of 9/11 alone in terms of Middle East invasions, mass surveillance and control that fulfilled the demands of the Project for the New American Century document published by the Sabbatian Neocons. What appear to be enemies are on the deep inside players on the same Sabbatian team. Israel and Arab 'royal' dictatorships are all ruled by Sabbatians and the recent peace agreements between Israel and Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and others are only making formal what has always been the case behind the scenes. Palestinians who have been subjected to grotesque tyranny since Israel was bombed and terrorised into existence in 1948 have never stood a chance. Sabbatian-Frankists have controlled Israel (so the constant theme of violence and war which Sabbatians love) and they have controlled the Arab countries that Palestinians have looked to for real support that never comes. 'Royal families' of the Arab world in Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, UAE, etc., are all Sabbatians with allegiance to the aims of the cult and not what is best for their Arabic populations. They have stolen the oil and financial resources from their people by false claims to be 'royal dynasties' with a genetic right to rule and by employing vicious militaries to impose their will.

Satanic 'illumination'

The Satanist Jacob Frank formed an alliance in 1773 with two other Sabbatians, Mayer Amschel Rothschild (1744-1812), founder of the Rothschild banking dynasty, and Jesuit-educated fraudulent Jew, Adam Weishaupt, and this led to the formation of the Bavarian Illuminati, firstly under another name, in 1776. The Illuminati would

be the manipulating force behind the French Revolution (1789-1799) and was also involved in the American Revolution (1775-1783) before and after the Illuminati's official creation. Weishaupt would later become (in public) a Protestant Christian in archetypal Sabbatian style. I read that his name can be decoded as Adam-Weishaupt or 'the first man to lead those who know'. He wasn't a leader in the sense that he was a subordinate, but he did lead those below him in a crusade of transforming human society that still continues today. The theme was confirmed as early as 1785 when a horseman courier called Lanz was reported to be struck by lighting and extensive Illuminati documents were found in his saddlebags. They made the link to Weishaupt and detailed the plan for world takeover. Current events with 'Covid' fascism have been in the making for a very long time. Jacob Frank was jailed for 13 years by the Catholic Inquisition after his arrest in 1760 and on his release he headed for Frankfurt, Germany, home city and headquarters of the House of Rothschild where the alliance was struck with Mayer Amschel Rothschild and Weishaupt. Rothschild arranged for Frank to be given the title of Baron and he became a wealthy nobleman with a big following of Jews in Germany, the Austro-Hungarian Empire and other European countries. Most of them would have believed he was on their side.

The name 'Illuminati' came from the Zohar which is a body of works in the Jewish mystical 'bible' called the Kabbalah. 'Zohar' is the foundation of Sabbatian-Frankist belief and in Hebrew 'Zohar' means 'splendour', 'radiance', 'illuminated', and so we have 'Illuminati'. They claim to be the 'Illuminated Ones' from their knowledge systematically hidden from the human population and passed on through generations of carefully-chosen initiates in the global secret society network or Cult. Hidden knowledge includes an awareness of the Cult agenda for the world and the nature of our collective reality that I will explore later. Cult 'illumination' is symbolised by the torch held by the Statue of Liberty which was gifted to New York by French Freemasons in Paris who knew exactly what it represents. 'Liberty' symbolises the goddess worshipped in

Babylon as Queen Semiramis or Ishtar. The significance of this will become clear. Notice again the ubiquitous theme of inversion with the Statue of 'Liberty' really symbolising mass control (Fig 7). A mirror-image statute stands on an island in the River Seine in Paris from where New York Liberty originated (Fig 8). A large replica of the Liberty flame stands on top of the Pont de l'Alma tunnel in Paris where Princess Diana died in a Cult ritual described in *The Biggest Secret*. Lucifer 'the light bringer' is related to all this (and much more as we'll see) and 'Lucifer' is a central figure in Sabbatian-Frankism and its associated Satanism. Sabbatians reject the Jewish Torah, or Pentateuch, the 'five books of Moses' in the Old Testament known as Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy which are claimed by Judaism and Christianity to have been dictated by 'God' to Moses on Mount Sinai. Sabbatians say these do not apply to them and they seek to replace them with the Zohar to absorb Judaism and its followers into their inversion which is an expression of a much greater global inversion. They want to delete all religions and force humanity to worship a one-world religion – Sabbatian Satanism that also includes worship of the Earth goddess. Satanic themes are being more and more introduced into mainstream society and while Christianity is currently the foremost target for destruction the others are planned to follow.

Figure 7: The Cult goddess of Babylon disguised as the Statue of Liberty holding the flame of Lucifer the 'light bringer'.

Figure 8: Liberty's mirror image in Paris where the New York version originated.

Marx brothers

Rabbi Marvin Antelman connects the Illuminati to the Jacobins in *To Eliminate the Opiate* and Jacobins were the force behind the French Revolution. He links both to the Bund der Gerechten, or League of the Just, which was the network that inflicted communism/Marxism on the world. Antelman wrote:

> The original inner circle of the Bund der Gerechten consisted of born Catholics, Protestants and Jews [Sabbatian-Frankist infiltrators], and those representatives of respective subdivisions formulated schemes for the ultimate destruction of their faiths. The heretical Catholics laid plans which they felt would take a century or more for the ultimate destruction of the church; the apostate Jews for the ultimate destruction of the Jewish religion.

Sabbatian-created communism connects into this anti-religion agenda in that communism does not allow for the free practice of religion. The Sabbatian 'Bund' became the International Communist Party and Communist League and in 1848 'Marxism' was born with the Communist Manifesto of Sabbatian assets Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. It is absolutely no coincidence that Marxism, just a different name for fascist and other centrally-controlled tyrannies, is being imposed worldwide as a result of the 'Covid' hoax and nor that Marxist/fascist China was the place where the hoax originated. The reason for this will become very clear in the chapter 'Covid: The calculated catastrophe'. The so-called 'Woke' mentality has hijacked

traditional beliefs of the political left and replaced them with far-right make-believe 'social justice' better known as Marxism. Woke will, however, be swallowed by its own perceived 'revolution' which is really the work of billionaires and billionaire corporations feigning being 'Woke'. Marxism is being touted by Wokers as a replacement for 'capitalism' when we don't have 'capitalism'. We have cartelism in which the market is stitched up by the very Cult billionaires and corporations bankrolling Woke. Billionaires love Marxism which keeps the people in servitude while they control from the top. Terminally naïve Wokers think they are 'changing the world' when it's the Cult that is doing the changing and when they have played their vital part and become surplus to requirements they, too, will be targeted. The Illuminati-Jacobins were behind the period known as 'The Terror' in the French Revolution in 1793 and 1794 when Jacobin Maximillian de Robespierre and his Orwellian 'Committee of Public Safety' killed 17,000 'enemies of the Revolution' who had once been 'friends of the Revolution'. Karl Marx (1818-1883), whose Sabbatian creed of Marxism has cost the lives of at least 100 million people, is a hero once again to Wokers who have been systematically kept ignorant of real history by their 'education' programming. As a result they now promote a Sabbatian 'Marxist' abomination destined at some point to consume them. Rabbi Antelman, who spent decades researching the Sabbatian plot, said of the League of the Just and Karl Marx:

> Contrary to popular opinion Karl Marx did not originate the Communist Manifesto. He was paid for his services by the League of the Just, which was known in its country of origin, Germany, as the Bund der Geaechteten.

Antelman said the text attributed to Marx was the work of other people and Marx 'was only repeating what others already said'. Marx was 'a hired hack – lackey of the wealthy Illuminists'. Marx famously said that religion was the 'opium of the people' (part of the Sabbatian plan to demonise religion) and Antelman called his books, *To Eliminate the Opiate*. Marx was born Jewish, but his family converted to Christianity (Sabbatian modus operandi) and he

attacked Jews, not least in his book, *A World Without Jews*. In doing so he supported the Sabbatian plan to destroy traditional Jewishness and Judaism which we are clearly seeing today with the vindictive targeting of orthodox Jews by the Sabbatian government of Israel over 'Covid' laws. I don't follow any religion and it has done much damage to the world over centuries and acted as a perceptual straightjacket. Renegade Minds, however, are always asking *why* something is being done. It doesn't matter if they agree or disagree with what is happening – *why* is it happening is the question. The 'why?' can be answered with regard to religion in that religions create interacting communities of believers when the Cult wants to dismantle all discourse, unity and interaction (see 'Covid' lockdowns) and the ultimate goal is to delete all religions for a one-world religion of Cult Satanism worshipping their 'god' of which more later. We see the same 'why?' with gun control in America. I don't have guns and don't want them, but why is the Cult seeking to disarm the population at the same time that law enforcement agencies are armed to their molars and why has every tyrant in history sought to disarm people before launching the final takeover? They include Hitler, Stalin, Pol Pot and Mao who followed confiscation with violent seizing of power. You know it's a Cult agenda by the people who immediately race to the microphones to exploit dead people in multiple shootings. Ultra-Zionist Cult lackey Senator Chuck Schumer was straight on the case after ten people were killed in Boulder, Colorado in March, 2121. Simple rule … if Schumer wants it the Cult wants it and the same with his ultra-Zionist mate the wild-eyed Senator Adam Schiff. At the same time they were calling for the disarmament of Americans, many of whom live a long way from a police response, Schumer, Schiff and the rest of these pampered clowns were sitting on Capitol Hill behind a razor-wired security fence protected by thousands of armed troops in addition to their own armed bodyguards. Mom and pop in an isolated home? They're just potential mass shooters.

Zion Mainframe

Sabbatian-Frankists and most importantly the Rothschilds were behind the creation of 'Zionism', a political movement that demanded a Jewish homeland in Israel as promised by Sabbatai Zevi. The very symbol of Israel comes from the German meaning of the name Rothschild. Dynasty founder Mayer Amschel Rothschild changed the family name from Bauer to Rothschild, or 'Red-Shield' in German, in deference to the six-pointed 'Star of David' hexagram displayed on the family's home in Frankfurt. The symbol later appeared on the flag of Israel after the Rothschilds were centrally involved in its creation. Hexagrams are not a uniquely Jewish symbol and are widely used in occult ('hidden') networks often as a symbol for Saturn (see my other books for why). Neither are Zionism and Jewishness interchangeable. Zionism is a political movement and philosophy and not a 'race' or a people. Many Jews oppose Zionism and many non-Jews, including US President Joe Biden, call themselves Zionists as does Israel-centric Donald Trump. America's support for the Israel government is pretty much a gimme with ultra-Zionist billionaires and corporations providing fantastic and dominant funding for both political parties. Former Congresswoman Cynthia McKinney has told how she was approached immediately she ran for office to 'sign the pledge' to Israel and confirm that she would always vote in that country's best interests. All American politicians are approached in this way. Anyone who refuses will get no support or funding from the enormous and all-powerful Zionist lobby that includes organisations like mega-lobby group AIPAC, the American Israel Public Affairs Committee. Trump's biggest funder was ultra-Zionist casino and media billionaire Sheldon Adelson while major funders of the Democratic Party include ultra-Zionist George Soros and ultra-Zionist financial and media mogul, Haim Saban. Some may reel back at the suggestion that Soros is an Israel-firster (Sabbatian-controlled Israel-firster), but Renegade Minds watch the actions not the words and everywhere Soros donates his billions the Sabbatian agenda benefits. In the spirit of Sabbatian inversion Soros pledged $1 billion for a new university network to promote 'liberal values and tackle intolerance'. He made the announcement during his annual speech

at the Cult-owned World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, in January, 2020, after his 'harsh criticism' of 'authoritarian rulers' around the world. You can only laugh at such brazen mendacity. How *he* doesn't laugh is the mystery. Translated from the Orwellian 'liberal values and tackle intolerance' means teaching non-white people to hate white people and for white people to loathe themselves for being born white. The reason for that will become clear.

The 'Anti-Semitism' fraud

Zionists support the Jewish homeland in the land of Palestine which has been the Sabbatian-Rothschild goal for so long, but not for the benefit of Jews. Sabbatians and their global Anti-Semitism Industry have skewed public and political opinion to equate opposing the violent extremes of Zionism to be a blanket attack and condemnation of all Jewish people. Sabbatians and their global Anti-Semitism Industry have skewed public and political opinion to equate opposing the violent extremes of Zionism to be a blanket attack and condemnation of all Jewish people. This is nothing more than a Sabbatian protection racket to stop legitimate investigation and exposure of their agendas and activities. The official definition of 'anti-Semitism' has more recently been expanded to include criticism of Zionism – a *political movement* – and this was done to further stop exposure of Sabbatian infiltrators who created Zionism as we know it today in the 19th century. Renegade Minds will talk about these subjects when they know the shit that will come their way. People must decide if they want to know the truth or just cower in the corner in fear of what others will say. Sabbatians have been trying to label me as 'anti-Semitic' since the 1990s as I have uncovered more and more about their background and agendas. Useless, gutless, fraudulent 'journalists' then just repeat the smears without question and on the day I was writing this section a pair of unquestioning repeaters called Ben Quinn and Archie Bland (how appropriate) outright called me an 'anti-Semite' in the establishment propaganda sheet, the London *Guardian*, with no supporting evidence. The

Sabbatian Anti-Semitism Industry said so and who are they to question that? They wouldn't dare. Ironically 'Semitic' refers to a group of languages in the Middle East that are almost entirely Arabic. 'Anti-Semitism' becomes 'anti-Arab' which if the consequences of this misunderstanding were not so grave would be hilarious. Don't bother telling Quinn and Bland. I don't want to confuse them, bless 'em. One reason I am dubbed 'anti-Semitic' is that I wrote in the 1990s that Jewish operatives (Sabbatians) were heavily involved in the Russian Revolution when Sabbatians overthrew the Romanov dynasty. This apparently made me 'anti-Semitic'. Oh, really? Here is a section from *The Trigger*:

British journalist Robert Wilton confirmed these themes in his 1920 book *The Last Days of the Romanovs* when he studied official documents from the Russian government to identify the members of the Bolshevik ruling elite between 1917 and 1919. The Central Committee included 41 Jews among 62 members; the Council of the People's Commissars had 17 Jews out of 22 members; and 458 of the 556 most important Bolshevik positions between 1918 and 1919 were occupied by Jewish people. Only 17 were Russian. Then there were the 23 Jews among the 36 members of the vicious Cheka Soviet secret police established in 1917 who would soon appear all across the country.

Professor Robert Service of Oxford University, an expert on 20th century Russian history, found evidence that ['Jewish'] Leon Trotsky had sought to make sure that Jews were enrolled in the Red Army and were disproportionately represented in the Soviet civil bureaucracy that included the Cheka which performed mass arrests, imprisonment and executions of 'enemies of the people'. A US State Department Decimal File (861.00/5339) dated November 13th, 1918, names [Rothschild banking agent in America] Jacob Schiff and a list of ultra-Zionists as funders of the Russian Revolution leading to claims of a 'Jewish plot', but the key point missed by all is they were not 'Jews' – they were Sabbatian-Frankists.

Britain's Winston Churchill made the same error by mistake or otherwise. He wrote in a 1920 edition of the *Illustrated Sunday Herald* that those behind the Russian revolution were part of a 'worldwide conspiracy for the overthrow of civilisation and for the reconstitution of society on the basis of arrested development, of envious malevolence, and impossible equality' (see 'Woke' today because that has been created by the same network). Churchill said there was no need to exaggerate the part played in the creation of Bolshevism and in the actual bringing about of the Russian

Revolution 'by these international and for the most part atheistical Jews' ['atheistical Jews' = Sabbatians]. Churchill said it is certainly a very great one and probably outweighs all others: 'With the notable exception of Lenin, the majority of the leading figures are Jews.' He went on to describe, knowingly or not, the Sabbatian modus operandi of placing puppet leaders nominally in power while they control from the background:

> Moreover, the principal inspiration and driving power comes from the Jewish leaders. Thus Tchitcherin, a pure Russian, is eclipsed by his nominal subordinate, Litvinoff, and the influence of Russians like Bukharin or Lunacharski cannot be compared with the power of Trotsky, or of Zinovieff, the Dictator of the Red Citadel (Petrograd), or of Krassin or Radek – all Jews. In the Soviet institutions the predominance of Jews is even more astonishing. And the prominent, if not indeed the principal, part in the system of terrorism applied by the Extraordinary Commissions for Combatting Counter-Revolution has been taken by Jews, and in some notable cases by Jewesses.

What I said about seriously disproportionate involvement in the Russian Revolution by Jewish 'revolutionaries' (Sabbatians) is provable fact, but truth is no defence against the Sabbatian Anti-Semitism Industry, its repeater parrots like Quinn and Bland, and the now breathtaking network of so-called 'Woke' 'anti-hate' groups with interlocking leaderships and funding which have the role of discrediting and silencing anyone who gets too close to exposing the Sabbatians. We have seen 'truth is no defence' confirmed in legal judgements with the Saskatchewan Human Rights Commission in Canada decreeing this: 'Truthful statements can be presented in a manner that would meet the definition of hate speech, and not all truthful statements must be free from restriction.' Most 'anti-hate' activists, who are themselves consumed by hatred, are too stupid and ignorant of the world to know how they are being used. They are far too far up their own virtue-signalling arses and it's far too dark for them to see anything.

The 'revolution' game

The background and methods of the 'Russian' Revolution are straight from the Sabbatian playbook seen in the French Revolution

and endless others around the world that appear to start as a revolution of the people against tyrannical rule and end up with a regime change to more tyrannical rule overtly or covertly. Wars, terror attacks and regime overthrows follow the Sabbatian cult through history with its agents creating them as Problem-Reaction-Solutions to remove opposition on the road to world domination. Sabbatian dots connect the Rothschilds with the Illuminati, Jacobins of the French Revolution, the 'Bund' or League of the Just, the International Communist Party, Communist League and the Communist Manifesto of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels that would lead to the Rothschild-funded Russian Revolution. The sequence comes under the heading of 'creative destruction' when you advance to your global goal by continually destroying the status quo to install a new status quo which you then also destroy. The two world wars come to mind. With each new status quo you move closer to your planned outcome. Wars and mass murder are to Sabbatians a collective blood sacrifice ritual. They are obsessed with death for many reasons and one is that death is an inversion of life. Satanists and Sabbatians are obsessed with death and often target churches and churchyards for their rituals. Inversion-obsessed Sabbatians explain the use of inverted symbolism including the *inverted* pentagram and *inverted* cross. The inversion of the cross has been related to targeting Christianity, but the cross was a religious symbol long before Christianity and its inversion is a statement about the Sabbatian mentality and goals more than any single religion.

Sabbatians operating in Germany were behind the rise of the occult-obsessed Nazis and the subsequent Jewish exodus from Germany and Europe to Palestine and the United States after World War Two. The Rothschild dynasty was at the forefront of this both as political manipulators and by funding the operation. Why would Sabbatians help to orchestrate the horrors inflicted on Jews by the Nazis and by Stalin after they organised the Russian Revolution? Sabbatians hate Jews and their religion, that's why. They pose as Jews and secure positions of control within Jewish society and play the 'anti-Semitism' card to protect themselves from exposure

through a global network of organisations answering to the Sabbatian-created-and-controlled globe-spanning intelligence network that involves a stunning web of military-intelligence operatives and operations for a tiny country of just nine million. Among them are Jewish assets who are not Sabbatians but have been convinced by them that what they are doing is for the good of Israel and the Jewish community to protect them from what they have been programmed since childhood to believe is a Jew-hating hostile world. The Jewish community is just a highly convenient cover to hide the true nature of Sabbatians. Anyone getting close to exposing their game is accused by Sabbatian place-people and gofers of 'anti-Semitism' and claiming that all Jews are part of a plot to take over the world. I am not saying that. I am saying that Sabbatians – the *real* Jew-haters – have infiltrated the Jewish community to use them both as a cover and an 'anti-Semitic' defence against exposure. Thus we have the Anti-Semitism Industry targeted researchers in this way and most Jewish people think this is justified and genuine. They don't know that their 'Jewish' leaders and institutions of state, intelligence and military are not controlled by Jews at all, but cultists and stooges of Sabbatian-Frankism. I once added my name to a pro-Jewish freedom petition online and the next time I looked my name was gone and text had been added to the petition blurb to attack me as an 'anti-Semite' such is the scale of perceptual programming.

Moving on America

I tell the story in *The Trigger* and a chapter called 'Atlantic Crossing' how particularly after Israel was established the Sabbatians moved in on the United States and eventually grasped control of government administration, the political system via both Democrats and Republicans, the intelligence community like the CIA and National Security Agency (NSA), the Pentagon and mass media. Through this seriously compartmentalised network Sabbatians and their operatives in Mossad, Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) and US agencies pulled off 9/11 and blamed it on 19 'Al-Qaeda hijackers' dominated by men from, or connected to, Sabbatian-ruled Saudi

Arabia. The '19' were not even on the planes let alone flew those big passenger jets into buildings while being largely incompetent at piloting one-engine light aircraft. 'Hijacker' Hani Hanjour who is said to have flown American Airlines Flight 77 into the Pentagon with a turn and manoeuvre most professional pilots said they would have struggled to do was banned from renting a small plane by instructors at the Freeway Airport in Bowie, Maryland, just *six weeks* earlier on the grounds that he was an incompetent pilot. The Jewish population of the world is just 0.2 percent with even that almost entirely concentrated in Israel (75 percent Jewish) and the United States (around two percent). This two percent and globally 0.2 percent refers to *Jewish* people and not Sabbatian interlopers who are a fraction of that fraction. What a sobering thought when you think of the fantastic influence on world affairs of tiny Israel and that the Project for the New America Century (PNAC) which laid out the blueprint in September, 2000, for America's war on terror and regime change wars in Iraq, Libya and Syria was founded and dominated by Sabbatians known as 'Neocons'. The document conceded that this plan would not be supported politically or publicly without a major attack on American soil and a Problem-Reaction-Solution excuse to send troops to war across the Middle East. Sabbatian Neocons said:

> ... [The] process of transformation ... [war and regime change] ... is likely to be a long one, absent some catastrophic and catalysing event – like a new Pearl Harbor.

Four months later many of those who produced that document came to power with their inane puppet George Bush from the long-time Sabbatian Bush family. They included Sabbatian Dick Cheney who was officially vice-president, but really de-facto president for the entirety of the 'Bush' government. Nine months after the 'Bush' inauguration came what Bush called at the time 'the Pearl Harbor of the 21st century' and with typical Sabbatian timing and symbolism 2001 was the 60th anniversary of the attack in 1941 by the Japanese Air Force on Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, which allowed President Franklin Delano Roosevelt to take the United States into a Sabbatian-

instigated Second World War that he said in his election campaign that he never would. The evidence is overwhelming that Roosevelt and his military and intelligence networks knew the attack was coming and did nothing to stop it, but they did make sure that America's most essential naval ships were not in Hawaii at the time. Three thousand Americans died in the Pearl Harbor attacks as they did on September 11th. By the 9/11 year of 2001 Sabbatians had widely infiltrated the US government, military and intelligence operations and used their compartmentalised assets to pull off the 'Al-Qaeda' attacks. If you read *The Trigger* it will blow your mind to see the utterly staggering concentration of 'Jewish' operatives (Sabbatian infiltrators) in essential positions of political, security, legal, law enforcement, financial and business power before, during, and after the attacks to make them happen, carry them out, and then cover their tracks – and I do mean *staggering* when you think of that 0.2 percent of the world population and two percent of Americans which are Jewish while Sabbatian infiltrators are a fraction of that. A central foundation of the 9/11 conspiracy was the hijacking of government, military, Air Force and intelligence computer systems in real time through 'back-door' access made possible by Israeli (Sabbatian) 'cyber security' software. Sabbatian-controlled Israel is on the way to rivalling Silicon Valley for domination of cyberspace and is becoming the dominant force in cyber-security which gives them access to entire computer systems and their passcodes across the world. Then add to this that Zionists head (officially) Silicon Valley giants like Google (Larry Page and Sergey Brin), Google-owned YouTube (Susan Wojcicki), Facebook (Mark Zuckerberg and Sheryl Sandberg), and Apple (Chairman Arthur D. Levinson), and that ultra-Zionist hedge fund billionaire Paul Singer has a $1 billion stake in Twitter which is only nominally headed by 'CEO' pothead Jack Dorsey. As cable news host Tucker Carlson said of Dorsey: 'There used to be debate in the medical community whether dropping a ton of acid had permanent effects and I think that debate has now ended.' Carlson made the comment after Dorsey told a hearing on Capitol Hill (if you cut through his bullshit) that he

believed in free speech so long as he got to decide what you can hear and see. These 'big names' of Silicon Valley are only front men and women for the Global Cult, not least the Sabbatians, who are the true controllers of these corporations. Does anyone still wonder why these same people and companies have been ferociously censoring and banning people (like me) for exposing any aspect of the Cult agenda and especially the truth about the 'Covid' hoax which Sabbatians have orchestrated?

The Jeffrey Epstein paedophile ring was a Sabbatian operation. He was officially 'Jewish' but he was a Sabbatian and women abused by the ring have told me about the high number of 'Jewish' people involved. The Epstein horror has Sabbatian written all over it and matches perfectly their modus operandi and obsession with sex and ritual. Epstein was running a Sabbatian blackmail ring in which famous people with political and other influence were provided with young girls for sex while everything was being filmed and recorded on hidden cameras and microphones at his New York house, Caribbean island and other properties. Epstein survivors have described this surveillance system to me and some have gone public. Once the famous politician or other figure knew he or she was on video they tended to do whatever they were told. Here we go again …when you've got them by the balls their hearts and minds will follow. Sabbatians use this blackmail technique on a wide scale across the world to entrap politicians and others they need to act as demanded. Epstein's private plane, the infamous 'Lolita Express', had many well-known passengers including Bill Clinton while Bill Gates has flown on an Epstein plane and met with him four years after Epstein had been jailed for paedophilia. They subsequently met many times at Epstein's home in New York according to a witness who was there. Epstein's infamous side-kick was Ghislaine Maxwell, daughter of Mossad agent and ultra-Zionist mega-crooked British businessman, Bob Maxwell, who at one time owned the *Daily Mirror* newspaper. Maxwell was murdered at sea on his boat in 1991 by Sabbatian-controlled Mossad when he became a liability with his

business empire collapsing as a former Mossad operative has confirmed (see *The Trigger*).

Money, money, money, funny money …

Before I come to the Sabbatian connection with the last three US presidents I will lay out the crucial importance to Sabbatians of controlling banking and finance. Sabbatian Mayer Amschel Rothschild set out to dominate this arena in his family's quest for total global control. What is freedom? It is, in effect, choice. The more choices you have the freer you are and the fewer your choices the more you are enslaved. In the global structure created over centuries by Sabbatians the biggest decider and restrictor of choice is … money. Across the world if you ask people what they would like to do with their lives and why they are not doing that they will reply 'I don't have the money'. This is the idea. A global elite of multi-billionaires are described as 'greedy' and that is true on one level; but control of money – who has it and who doesn't – is not primarily about greed. It's about control. Sabbatians have seized ever more control of finance and sucked the wealth of the world out of the hands of the population. We talk now, after all, about the 'One-percent' and even then the wealthiest are a lot fewer even than that. This has been made possible by a money scam so outrageous and so vast it could rightly be called the scam of scams founded on creating 'money' out of nothing and 'loaning' that with interest to the population. Money out of nothing is called 'credit'. Sabbatians have asserted control over governments and banking ever more completely through the centuries and secured financial laws that allow banks to lend hugely more than they have on deposit in a confidence trick known as fractional reserve lending. Imagine if you could lend money that doesn't exist and charge the recipient interest for doing so. You would end up in jail. Bankers by contrast end up in mansions, private jets, Malibu and Monaco.

Banks are only required to keep a fraction of their deposits and wealth in their vaults and they are allowed to lend 'money' they don't have called 'credit. Go into a bank for a loan and if you succeed

the banker will not move any real wealth into your account. They will type into your account the amount of the agreed 'loan' – say £100,000. This is not wealth that really exists; it is non-existent, fresh-air, created-out-of-nothing 'credit' which has never, does not, and will never exist except in theory. Credit is backed by nothing except wind and only has buying power because people think that it has buying power and accept it in return for property, goods and services. I have described this situation as like those cartoon characters you see chasing each other and when they run over the edge of a cliff they keep running forward on fresh air until one of them looks down, realises what's happened, and they all crash into the ravine. The whole foundation of the Sabbatian financial system is to stop people looking down except for periodic moments when they want to crash the system (as in 2008 and 2020 ongoing) and reap the rewards from all the property, businesses and wealth their borrowers had signed over as 'collateral' in return for a 'loan' of fresh air. Most people think that money is somehow created by governments when it comes into existence from the start as a debt through banks 'lending' illusory money called credit. Yes, the very currency of exchange is a *debt* from day one issued as an interest-bearing loan. Why don't governments create money interest-free and lend it to their people interest-free? Governments are controlled by Sabbatians and the financial system is controlled by Sabbatians for whom interest-free money would be a nightmare come true. Sabbatians underpin their financial domination through their global network of central banks, including the privately-owned US Federal Reserve and Britain's Bank of England, and this is orchestrated by a privately-owned central bank coordination body called the Bank for International Settlements in Basle, Switzerland, created by the usual suspects including the Rockefellers and Rothschilds. Central bank chiefs don't answer to governments or the people. They answer to the Bank for International Settlements or, in other words, the Global Cult which is dominated today by Sabbatians.

Built-in disaster

There are so many constituent scams within the overall banking scam. When you take out a loan of thin-air credit only the amount of that loan is theoretically brought into circulation to add to the amount in circulation; but you are paying back the principle plus interest. The additional interest is not created and this means that with every 'loan' there is a shortfall in the money in circulation between what is borrowed and what has to be paid back. There is never even close to enough money in circulation to repay all outstanding public and private debt including interest. Coldly weaved in the very fabric of the system is the certainty that some will lose their homes, businesses and possessions to the banking 'lender'. This is less obvious in times of 'boom' when the amount of money in circulation (and the debt) is expanding through more people wanting and getting loans. When a downturn comes and the money supply contracts it becomes painfully obvious that there is not enough money to service all debt and interest. This is less obvious in times of 'boom' when the amount of money in circulation (and the debt) is expanding through more people wanting and getting loans. When a downturn comes and the money supply contracts and it becomes painfully obvious – as in 2008 and currently – that there is not enough money to service all debt and interest. Sabbatian banksters have been leading the human population through a calculated series of booms (more debt incurred) and busts (when the debt can't be repaid and the banks get the debtor's tangible wealth in exchange for non-existent 'credit'). With each 'bust' Sabbatian bankers have absorbed more of the world's tangible wealth and we end up with the One-percent. Governments are in bankruptcy levels of debt to the same system and are therefore owned by a system they do not control. The Federal Reserve, 'America's central bank', is privately-owned and American presidents only nominally appoint its chairman or woman to maintain the illusion that it's an arm of government. It's not. The 'Fed' is a cartel of private banks which handed billions to its associates and friends after the crash of 2008 and has been Sabbatian-controlled since it was manipulated into being in 1913 through the covert trickery of Rothschild banking agents Jacob Schiff and Paul

Warburg, and the Sabbatian Rockefeller family. Somehow from a Jewish population of two-percent and globally 0.2 percent (Sabbatian interlopers remember are far smaller) ultra-Zionists headed the Federal Reserve for 31 years between 1987 and 2018 in the form of Alan Greenspan, Bernard Bernanke and Janet Yellen (now Biden's Treasury Secretary) with Yellen's deputy chairman a Israeli-American duel citizen and ultra-Zionist Stanley Fischer, a former governor of the Bank of Israel. Ultra-Zionist Fed chiefs spanned the presidencies of Ronald Reagan ('Republican'), Father George Bush ('Republican'), Bill Clinton ('Democrat'), Boy George Bush ('Republican') and Barack Obama ('Democrat'). We should really add the pre-Greenspan chairman, Paul Adolph Volcker, 'appointed' by Jimmy Carter ('Democrat') who ran the Fed between 1979 and 1987 during the Carter and Reagan administrations before Greenspan took over. Volcker was a long-time associate and business partner of the Rothschilds. No matter what the 'party' officially in power the United States economy was directed by the same force. Here are members of the Obama, Trump and Biden administrations and see if you can make out a common theme.

Barack Obama ('Democrat')

Ultra-Zionists Robert Rubin, Larry Summers, and Timothy Geithner ran the US Treasury in the Clinton administration and two of them reappeared with Obama. Ultra-Zionist Fed chairman Alan Greenspan had manipulated the crash of 2008 through deregulation and jumped ship just before the disaster to make way for ultra-Zionist Bernard Bernanke to hand out trillions to Sabbatian 'too big to fail' banks and businesses, including the ubiquitous ultra-Zionist Goldman Sachs which has an ongoing staff revolving door operation between itself and major financial positions in government worldwide. Obama inherited the fallout of the crash when he took office in January, 2009, and fortunately he had the support of his ultra-Zionist White House Chief of Staff Rahm Emmanuel, son of a terrorist who helped to bomb Israel into being in 1948, and his ultra-Zionist senior adviser David Axelrod, chief strategist in Obama's two

successful presidential campaigns. Emmanuel, later mayor of Chicago and former senior fundraiser and strategist for Bill Clinton, is an example of the Sabbatian policy after Israel was established of migrating insider families to America so their children would be born American citizens. 'Obama' chose this financial team throughout his administration to respond to the Sabbatian-instigated crisis:

Timothy Geithner (ultra-Zionist) Treasury Secretary; Jacob J. Lew, Treasury Secretary; Larry Summers (ultra-Zionist), director of the White House National Economic Council; Paul Adolph Volcker (Rothschild business partner), chairman of the Economic Recovery Advisory Board; Peter Orszag (ultra-Zionist), director of the Office of Management and Budget overseeing all government spending; Penny Pritzker (ultra-Zionist), Commerce Secretary; Jared Bernstein (ultra-Zionist), chief economist and economic policy adviser to Vice President Joe Biden; Mary Schapiro (ultra-Zionist), chair of the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC); Gary Gensler (ultra-Zionist), chairman of the Commodity Futures Trading Commission (CFTC); Sheila Bair (ultra-Zionist), chair of the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation (FDIC); Karen Mills (ultra-Zionist), head of the Small Business Administration (SBA); Kenneth Feinberg (ultra-Zionist), Special Master for Executive [bail-out] Compensation. Feinberg would be appointed to oversee compensation (with strings) to 9/11 victims and families in a campaign to stop them having their day in court to question the official story. At the same time ultra-Zionist Bernard Bernanke was chairman of the Federal Reserve and these are only some of the ultra-Zionists with allegiance to Sabbatian-controlled Israel in the Obama government. Obama's biggest corporate donor was ultra-Zionist Goldman Sachs which had employed many in his administration.

Donald Trump ('Republican')

Trump claimed to be an outsider (he wasn't) who had come to 'drain the swamp'. He embarked on this goal by immediately appointing ultra-Zionist Steve Mnuchin, a Goldman Sachs employee for 17

years, as his Treasury Secretary. Others included Gary Cohn (ultra-Zionist), chief operating officer of Goldman Sachs, his first Director of the National Economic Council and chief economic adviser, who was later replaced by Larry Kudlow (ultra-Zionist). Trump's senior adviser throughout his four years in the White House was his sinister son-in-law Jared Kushner, a life-long friend of Israel Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Kushner is the son of a convicted crook who was pardoned by Trump in his last days in office. Other ultra-Zionists in the Trump administration included: Stephen Miller, Senior Policy Adviser; Avrahm Berkowitz, Deputy Adviser to Trump and his Senior Adviser Jared Kushner; Ivanka Trump, Adviser to the President, who converted to Judaism when she married Jared Kushner; David Friedman, Trump lawyer and Ambassador to Israel; Jason Greenblatt, Trump Organization executive vice president and chief legal officer, who was made Special Representative for International Negotiations and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict; Rod Rosenstein, Deputy Attorney General; Elliot Abrams, Special Representative for Venezuela, then Iran; John Eisenberg, National Security Council Legal Adviser and Deputy Council to the President for National Security Affairs; Anne Neuberger, Deputy National Manager, National Security Agency; Ezra Cohen-Watnick, Acting Under Secretary of Defense for Intelligence; Elan Carr, Special Envoy to monitor and combat anti-Semitism; Len Khodorkovsky, Deputy Special Envoy to monitor and combat anti-Semitism; Reed Cordish, Assistant to the President, Intragovernmental and Technology Initiatives. Trump Vice President Mike Pence and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, both Christian Zionists, were also vehement supporters of Israel and its goals and ambitions.

Donald 'free-speech believer' Trump pardoned a number of financial and violent criminals while ignoring calls to pardon Julian Assange and Edward Snowden whose crimes are revealing highly relevant information about government manipulation and corruption and the widespread illegal surveillance of the American people by US 'security' agencies. It's so good to know that Trump is on the side of freedom and justice and not mega-criminals with

allegiance to Sabbatian-controlled Israel. These included a pardon for Israeli spy Jonathan Pollard who was jailed for life in 1987 under the Espionage Act. Aviem Sella, the Mossad agent who recruited Pollard, was also pardoned by Trump while Assange sat in jail and Snowden remained in exile in Russia. Sella had 'fled' (was helped to escape) to Israel in 1987 and was never extradited despite being charged under the Espionage Act. A Trump White House statement said that Sella's clemency had been 'supported by Benjamin Netanyahu, Ron Dermer, Israel's US Ambassador, David Friedman, US Ambassador to Israel and Miriam Adelson, wife of leading Trump donor Sheldon Adelson who died shortly before. Other friends of Jared Kushner were pardoned along with Sholom Weiss who was believed to be serving the longest-ever white-collar prison sentence of more than 800 years in 2000. The sentence was commuted of Ponzi-schemer Eliyahu Weinstein who defrauded Jews and others out of $200 million. I did mention that Assange and Snowden were ignored, right? Trump gave Sabbatians almost everything they asked for in military and political support, moving the US Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem with its critical symbolic and literal implications for Palestinian statehood, and the 'deal of the Century' designed by Jared Kushner and David Friedman which gave the Sabbatian Israeli government the green light to substantially expand its already widespread program of building illegal Jewish-only settlements in the occupied land of the West Bank. This made a two-state 'solution' impossible by seizing all the land of a potential Palestinian homeland and that had been the plan since 1948 and then 1967 when the Arab-controlled Gaza Strip, West Bank, Sinai Peninsula and Syrian Golan Heights were occupied by Israel. All the talks about talks and road maps and delays have been buying time until the West Bank was physically occupied by Israeli real estate. Trump would have to be a monumentally ill-informed idiot not to see that this was the plan he was helping to complete. The Trump administration was in so many ways the Kushner administration which means the Netanyahu administration which means the Sabbatian administration. I understand why many opposing Cult fascism in all its forms gravitated to Trump, but he

was a crucial part of the Sabbatian plan and I will deal with this in the next chapter.

Joe Biden ('Democrat')

A barely cognitive Joe Biden took over the presidency in January, 2021, along with his fellow empty shell, Vice-President Kamala Harris, as the latest Sabbatian gofers to enter the White House. Names on the door may have changed and the 'party' – the force behind them remained the same as Zionists were appointed to a stream of pivotal areas relating to Sabbatian plans and policy. They included: Janet Yellen, Treasury Secretary, former head of the Federal Reserve, and still another ultra-Zionist running the US Treasury after Mnuchin (Trump), Lew and Geithner (Obama), and Summers and Rubin (Clinton); Anthony Blinken, Secretary of State; Wendy Sherman, Deputy Secretary of State (so that's 'Biden's' Sabbatian foreign policy sorted); Jeff Zients, White House coronavirus coordinator; Rochelle Walensky, head of the Centers for Disease Control; Rachel Levine, transgender deputy health secretary (that's 'Covid' hoax policy under control); Merrick Garland, Attorney General; Alejandro Mayorkas, Secretary of Homeland Security; Cass Sunstein, Homeland Security with responsibility for new immigration laws; Avril Haines, Director of National Intelligence; Anne Neuberger, National Security Agency cybersecurity director (note, cybersecurity); David Cohen, CIA Deputy Director; Ronald Klain, Biden's Chief of Staff (see Rahm Emanuel); Eric Lander, a 'leading geneticist', Office of Science and Technology Policy director (see Smart Grid, synthetic biology agenda); Jessica Rosenworcel, acting head of the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) which controls Smart Grid technology policy and electromagnetic communication systems including 5G. How can it be that so many pivotal positions are held by two-percent of the American population and 0.2 percent of the world population administration after administration no matter who is the president and what is the party? It's a coincidence? Of course it's not and this is why Sabbatians have built their colossal global web of interlocking 'anti-

hate' hate groups to condemn anyone who asks these glaring questions as an 'anti-Semite'. The way that Jewish people horrifically abused in Sabbatian-backed Nazi Germany are exploited to this end is stomach-turning and disgusting beyond words.

Political fusion

Sabbatian manipulation has reversed the roles of Republicans and Democrats and the same has happened in Britain with the Conservative and Labour Parties. Republicans and Conservatives were always labelled the 'right' and Democrats and Labour the 'left', but look at the policy positions now and the Democrat-Labour 'left' has moved further to the 'right' than Republicans and Conservatives under the banner of 'Woke', the Cult-created far-right tyranny. Where once the Democrat-Labour 'left' defended free speech and human rights they now seek to delete them and as I said earlier despite the 'Covid' fascism of the Jackboot Johnson Conservative government in the UK the Labour Party of leader Keir Starmer demanded even more extreme measures. The Labour Party has been very publicly absorbed by Sabbatians after a political and media onslaught against the previous leader, the weak and inept Jeremy Corbyn, over made-up allegations of 'anti-Semitism' both by him and his party. The plan was clear with this 'anti-Semite' propaganda and what was required in response was a swift and decisive 'fuck off' from Corbyn and a statement to expose the Anti-Semitism Industry (Sabbatian) attempt to silence Labour criticism of the Israeli government (Sabbatians) and purge the party of all dissent against the extremes of ultra-Zionism (Sabbatians). Instead Corbyn and his party fell to their knees and appeased the abusers which, by definition, is impossible. Appeasing one demand leads only to a new demand to be appeased until takeover is complete. Like I say – 'fuck off' would have been a much more effective policy and I have used it myself with great effect over the years when Sabbatians are on my case which is most of the time. I consider that fact a great compliment, by the way. The outcome of the Labour Party capitulation is that we now have a Sabbatian-controlled

Conservative Party 'opposed' by a Sabbatian-controlled Labour Party in a one-party Sabbatian state that hurtles towards the extremes of tyranny (the Sabbatian cult agenda). In America the situation is the same. Labour's Keir Starmer spends his days on his knees with his tongue out pointing to Tel Aviv, or I guess now Jerusalem, while Boris Johnson has an 'anti-Semitism czar' in the form of former Labour MP John Mann who keeps Starmer company on his prayer mat.

Sabbatian influence can be seen in Jewish members of the Labour Party who have been ejected for criticism of Israel including those from families that suffered in Nazi Germany. Sabbatians despise real Jewish people and target them even more harshly because it is so much more difficult to dub them 'anti-Semitic' although in their desperation they do try.

CHAPTER THREE

The Pushbacker sting

Until you realize how easy it is for your mind to be manipulated, you remain the puppet of someone else's game
Evita Ochel

I will use the presidencies of Trump and Biden to show how the manipulation of the one-party state plays out behind the illusion of political choice across the world. No two presidencies could – on the face of it – be more different and apparently at odds in terms of direction and policy.

A Renegade Mind sees beyond the obvious and focuses on outcomes and consequences and not image, words and waffle. The Cult embarked on a campaign to divide America between those who blindly support its agenda (the mentality known as 'Woke') and those who are pushing back on where the Cult and its Sabbatians want to go. This presents infinite possibilities for dividing and ruling the population by setting them at war with each other and allows a perceptual ring fence of demonisation to encircle the Pushbackers in a modern version of the Little Big Horn in 1876 when American cavalry led by Lieutenant Colonel George Custer were drawn into a trap, surrounded and killed by Native American tribes defending their land of thousands of years from being seized by the government. In this modern version the roles are reversed and it's those defending themselves from the Sabbatian government who are surrounded and the government that's seeking to destroy them. This trap was set years ago and to explain how we must return to 2016

and the emergence of Donald Trump as a candidate to be President of the United States. He set out to overcome the best part of 20 other candidates in the Republican Party before and during the primaries and was not considered by many in those early stages to have a prayer of living in the White House. The Republican Party was said to have great reservations about Trump and yet somehow he won the nomination. When you know how American politics works – politics in general – there is no way that Trump could have become the party's candidate unless the Sabbatian-controlled 'Neocons' that run the Republican Party wanted that to happen. We saw the proof in emails and documents made public by WikiLeaks that the Democratic Party hierarchy, or Democons, systematically undermined the campaign of Bernie Sanders to make sure that Sabbatian gofer Hillary Clinton won the nomination to be their presidential candidate. If the Democons could do that then the Neocons in the Republican Party could have derailed Trump in the same way. But they didn't and at that stage I began to conclude that Trump could well be the one chosen to be president. If that was the case the 'why' was pretty clear to see – the goal of dividing America between Cult agenda-supporting Wokers and Pushbackers who gravitated to Trump because he was telling them what they wanted to hear. His constituency of support had been increasingly ignored and voiceless for decades and profoundly through the eight years of Sabbatian puppet Barack Obama. Now here was someone speaking their language of pulling back from the incessant globalisation of political and economic power, the exporting of American jobs to China and elsewhere by 'American' (Sabbatian) corporations, the deletion of free speech, and the mass immigration policies that had further devastated job opportunities for the urban working class of all races and the once American heartlands of the Midwest.

Beware the forked tongue

Those people collectively sighed with relief that at last a political leader was apparently on their side, but another trait of the Renegade Mind is that you look even harder at people telling you

what you want to hear than those who are telling you otherwise. Obviously as I said earlier people wish what they want to hear to be true and genuine and they are much more likely to believe that than someone saying what they don't want to here and don't want to be true. Sales people are taught to be skilled in eliciting by calculated questioning what their customers want to hear and repeating that back to them as their own opinion to get their targets to like and trust them. Assets of the Cult are also sales people in the sense of selling perception. To read Cult manipulation you have to play the long and expanded game and not fall for the Vaudeville show of party politics. Both American parties are vehicles for the Cult and they exploit them in different ways depending on what the agenda requires at that moment. Trump and the Republicans were used to be the focus of dividing America and isolating Pushbackers to open the way for a Biden presidency to become the most extreme in American history by advancing the full-blown Woke (Cult) agenda with the aim of destroying and silencing Pushbackers now labelled Nazi Trump supporters and white supremacists.

Sabbatians wanted Trump in office for the reasons described by ultra-Zionist Saul Alinsky (1909-1972) who was promoting the Woke philosophy through 'community organising' long before anyone had heard of it. In those days it still went by its traditional name of Marxism. The reason for the manipulated Trump phenomenon was laid out in Alinsky's 1971 book, *Rules for Radicals*, which was his blueprint for overthrowing democratic and other regimes and replacing them with Sabbatian Marxism. Not surprisingly his to-do list was evident in the Sabbatian French and Russian 'Revolutions' and that in China which will become very relevant in the next chapter about the 'Covid' hoax. Among Alinsky's followers have been the deeply corrupt Barack Obama, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Hillary Clinton who described him as a 'hero'. All three are Sabbatian stooges with Pelosi personifying the arrogant corrupt idiocy that so widely fronts up for the Cult inner core. Predictably as a Sabbatian advocate of the 'light-bringer' Alinsky features Lucifer on the dedication page of his book as the original radical who gained

his own kingdom ('Earth' as we shall see). One of Alinsky's golden radical rules was to pick an individual and focus all attention, hatred and blame on them and not to target faceless bureaucracies and corporations. *Rules for Radicals* is really a Sabbatian handbook with its contents repeatedly employed all over the world for centuries and why wouldn't Sabbatians bring to power their designer-villain to be used as the individual on which all attention, hatred and blame was bestowed? This is what they did and the only question for me is how much Trump knew that and how much he was manipulated. A bit of both, I suspect. This was Alinsky's Trump technique from a man who died in 1972. The technique has spanned history:

Pick the target, freeze it, personalize it, polarize it. Don't try to attack abstract corporations or bureaucracies. Identify a responsible individual. Ignore attempts to shift or spread the blame.

From the moment Trump came to illusory power everything was about him. It wasn't about Republican policy or opinion, but all about Trump. Everything he did was presented in negative, derogatory and abusive terms by the Sabbatian-dominated media led by Cult operations such as CNN, MSNBC, *The New York Times* and the Jeff Bezos-owned *Washington Post* – 'Pick the target, freeze it, personalize it, polarize it.' Trump was turned into a demon to be vilified by those who hated him and a demi-god loved by those who worshipped him. This, in turn, had his supporters, too, presented as equally demonic in preparation for the punchline later down the line when Biden was about to take office. It was here's a Trump, there's a Trump, everywhere a Trump, Trump. Virtually every news story or happening was filtered through the lens of 'The Donald'. You loved him or hated him and which one you chose was said to define you as Satan's spawn or a paragon of virtue. Even supporting some Trump policies or statements and not others was enough for an assault on your character. No shades of grey were or are allowed. Everything is black and white (literally and figuratively). A Californian I knew had her head utterly scrambled by her hatred for Trump while telling people they should love each other. She was so totally consumed by

Trump Derangement Syndrome as it became to be known that this glaring contradiction would never have occurred to her. By definition anyone who criticised Trump or praised his opponents was a hero and this lady described Joe Biden as 'a kind, honest gentleman' when he's a provable liar, mega-crook and vicious piece of work to boot. Sabbatians had indeed divided America using Trump as the fall-guy and all along the clock was ticking on the consequences for his supporters.

In hock to his masters

Trump gave Sabbatians via Israel almost everything they wanted in his four years. Ask and you shall receive was the dynamic between himself and Benjamin Netanyahu orchestrated by Trump's ultra-Zionist son-in-law Jared Kushner, his ultra-Zionist Ambassador to Israel, David Friedman, and ultra-Zionist 'Israel adviser', Jason Greenblatt. The last two were central to the running and protecting from collapse of his business empire, the Trump Organisation, and colossal business failures made him forever beholding to Sabbatian networks that bailed him out. By the start of the 1990s Trump owed $4 billion to banks that he couldn't pay and almost $1billion of that was down to him personally and not his companies. This mega-disaster was the result of building two new casinos in Atlantic City and buying the enormous Taj Mahal operation which led to crippling debt payments. He had borrowed fantastic sums from 72 banks with major Sabbatian connections and although the scale of debt should have had him living in a tent alongside the highway they never foreclosed. A plan was devised to lift Trump from the mire by BT Securities Corporation and Rothschild Inc. and the case was handled by Wilber Ross who had worked for the Rothschilds for 27 years. Ross would be named US Commerce Secretary after Trump's election. Another crucial figure in saving Trump was ultra-Zionist 'investor' Carl Icahn who bought the Taj Mahal casino. Icahn was made special economic adviser on financial regulation in the Trump administration. He didn't stay long but still managed to find time to make a tidy sum of a reported $31.3 million when he sold his

holdings affected by the price of steel three days before Trump imposed a 235 percent tariff on steel imports. What amazing bits of luck these people have. Trump and Sabbatian operatives have long had a close association and his mentor and legal adviser from the early 1970s until 1986 was the dark and genetically corrupt ultra-Zionist Roy Cohn who was chief counsel to Senator Joseph McCarthy's 'communist' witch-hunt in the 1950s. *Esquire* magazine published an article about Cohn with the headline 'Don't mess with Roy Cohn'. He was described as the most feared lawyer in New York and 'a ruthless master of dirty tricks ... [with] ... more than one Mafia Don on speed dial'. Cohn's influence, contacts, support and protection made Trump a front man for Sabbatians in New York with their connections to one of Cohn's many criminal employers, the 'Russian' Sabbatian Mafia. Israel-centric media mogul Rupert Murdoch was introduced to Trump by Cohn and they started a long friendship. Cohn died in 1986 weeks after being disbarred for unethical conduct by the Appellate Division of the New York State Supreme Court. The wheels of justice do indeed run slow given the length of Cohn's crooked career.

QAnon-sense

We are asked to believe that Donald Trump with his fundamental connections to Sabbatian networks and operatives has been leading the fight to stop the Sabbatian agenda for the fascistic control of America and the world. Sure he has. A man entrapped during his years in the White House by Sabbatian operatives and whose biggest financial donor was casino billionaire Sheldon Adelson who was Sabbatian to his DNA?? Oh, do come on. Trump has been used to divide America and isolate Pushbackers on the Cult agenda under the heading of 'Trump supporters', 'insurrectionists' and 'white supremacists'. The US Intelligence/Mossad Psyop or psychological operation known as QAnon emerged during the Trump years as a central pillar in the Sabbatian campaign to lead Pushbackers into the trap set by those that wished to destroy them. I knew from the start that QAnon was a scam because I had seen the same scenario many

times before over 30 years under different names and I had written about one in particular in the books. 'Not again' was my reaction when QAnon came to the fore. The same script is pulled out every few years and a new name added to the letterhead. The story always takes the same form: 'Insiders' or 'the good guys' in the government-intelligence-military 'Deep State' apparatus were going to instigate mass arrests of the 'bad guys' which would include the Rockefellers, Rothschilds, Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton, George Soros, etc., etc. Dates are given for when the 'good guys' are going to move in, but the dates pass without incident and new dates are given which pass without incident. The central message to Pushbackers in each case is that they don't have to do anything because there is 'a plan' and it is all going to be sorted by the 'good guys' on the inside. 'Trust the plan' was a QAnon mantra when the only plan was to misdirect Pushbackers into putting their trust in a Psyop they believed to be real. Beware, beware, those who tell you what you want to hear and always check it out. Right up to Biden's inauguration QAnon was still claiming that 'the Storm' was coming and Trump would stay on as president when Biden and his cronies were arrested and jailed. It was never going to happen and of course it didn't, but what did happen as a result provided that punchline to the Sabbatian Trump/QAnon Psyop.

On January 6th, 2021, a very big crowd of Trump supporters gathered in the National Mall in Washington DC down from the Capitol Building to protest at what they believed to be widespread corruption and vote fraud that stopped Trump being re-elected for a second term as president in November, 2020. I say as someone that does not support Trump or Biden that the evidence is clear that major vote-fixing went on to favour Biden, a man with cognitive problems so advanced he can often hardly string a sentence together without reading the words written for him on the Teleprompter. Glaring ballot discrepancies included serious questions about electronic voting machines that make vote rigging a comparative cinch and hundreds of thousands of paper votes that suddenly appeared during already advanced vote counts and virtually all of

them for Biden. Early Trump leads in crucial swing states suddenly began to close and disappear. The pandemic hoax was used as the excuse to issue almost limitless numbers of mail-in ballots with no checks to establish that the recipients were still alive or lived at that address. They were sent to streams of people who had not even asked for them. Private organisations were employed to gather these ballots and who knows what they did with them before they turned up at the counts. The American election system has been manipulated over decades to become a sick joke with more holes than a Swiss cheese for the express purpose of dictating the results. Then there was the criminal manipulation of information by Sabbatian tech giants like Facebook, Twitter and Google-owned YouTube which deleted pro-Trump, anti-Biden accounts and posts while everything in support of Biden was left alone. Sabbatians wanted Biden to win because after the dividing of America it was time for full-on Woke and every aspect of the Cult agenda to be unleashed.

Hunter gatherer

Extreme Silicon Valley bias included blocking information by the *New York Post* exposing a Biden scandal that should have ended his bid for president in the final weeks of the campaign. Hunter Biden, his monumentally corrupt son, is reported to have sent a laptop to be repaired at a local store and failed to return for it. Time passed until the laptop became the property of the store for non-payment of the bill. When the owner saw what was on the hard drive he gave a copy to the FBI who did nothing even though it confirmed widespread corruption in which the Joe Biden family were using his political position, especially when he was vice president to Obama, to make multiple millions in countries around the world and most notably Ukraine and China. Hunter Biden's one-time business partner Tony Bobulinski went public when the story broke in the *New York Post* to confirm the corruption he saw and that Joe Biden not only knew what was going on he also profited from the spoils. Millions were handed over by a Chinese company with close

connections – like all major businesses in China – to the Chinese communist party of President Xi Jinping. Joe Biden even boasted at a meeting of the Cult's World Economic Forum that as vice president he had ordered the government of Ukraine to fire a prosecutor. What he didn't mention was that the same man just happened to be investigating an energy company which was part of Hunter Biden's corrupt portfolio. The company was paying him big bucks for no other reason than the influence his father had. Overnight Biden's presidential campaign should have been over given that he had lied publicly about not knowing what his son was doing. Instead almost the entire Sabbatian-owned mainstream media and Sabbatian-owned Silicon Valley suppressed circulation of the story. This alone went a mighty way to rigging the election of 2020. Cult assets like Mark Zuckerberg at Facebook also spent hundreds of millions to be used in support of Biden and vote 'administration'.

The Cult had used Trump as the focus to divide America and was now desperate to bring in moronic, pliable, corrupt Biden to complete the double-whammy. No way were they going to let little things like the will of the people thwart their plan. Silicon Valley widely censored claims that the election was rigged because it *was* rigged. For the same reason anyone claiming it was rigged was denounced as a 'white supremacist' including the pathetically few Republican politicians willing to say so. Right across the media where the claim was mentioned it was described as a 'false claim' even though these excuses for 'journalists' would have done no research into the subject whatsoever. Trump won seven million more votes than any sitting president had ever achieved while somehow a cognitively-challenged soon to be 78-year-old who was hidden away from the public for most of the campaign managed to win more votes than any presidential candidate in history. It makes no sense. You only had to see election rallies for both candidates to witness the enthusiasm for Trump and the apathy for Biden. Tens of thousands would attend Trump events while Biden was speaking in empty car parks with often only television crews attending and framing their shots to hide the fact that no one was there. It was pathetic to see

footage come to light of Biden standing at a podium making speeches only to TV crews and party fixers while reading the words written for him on massive Teleprompter screens. So, yes, those protestors on January 6th had a point about election rigging, but some were about to walk into a trap laid for them in Washington by the Cult Deep State and its QAnon Psyop. This was the Capitol Hill riot ludicrously dubbed an 'insurrection'.

The spider and the fly

Renegade Minds know there are not two 'sides' in politics, only one side, the Cult, working through all 'sides'. It's a stage show, a puppet show, to direct the perceptions of the population into focusing on diversions like parties and candidates while missing the puppeteers with their hands holding all the strings. The Capitol Hill 'insurrection' brings us back to the Little Big Horn. Having created two distinct opposing groupings – Woke and Pushbackers – the trap was about to be sprung. Pushbackers were to be encircled and isolated by associating them all in the public mind with Trump and then labelling Trump as some sort of Confederate leader. I knew immediately that the Capitol riot was a set-up because of two things. One was how easy the rioters got into the building with virtually no credible resistance and secondly I could see – as with the 'Covid' hoax in the West at the start of 2020 – how the Cult could exploit the situation to move its agenda forward with great speed. My experience of Cult techniques and activities over more than 30 years has showed me that while they do exploit situations they haven't themselves created this never happens with events of fundamental agenda significance. Every time major events giving cultists the excuse to rapidly advance their plan you find they are manipulated into being for the specific reason of providing that excuse – Problem-Reaction-Solution. Only a tiny minority of the huge crowd of Washington protestors sought to gain entry to the Capitol by smashing windows and breaching doors. That didn't matter. The whole crowd and all Pushbackers, even if they did not support Trump, were going to be lumped together as dangerous

insurrectionists and conspiracy theorists. The latter term came into widespread use through a CIA memo in the 1960s aimed at discrediting those questioning the nonsensical official story of the Kennedy assassination and it subsequently became widely employed by the media. It's still being used by inept 'journalists' with no idea of its origin to discredit anyone questioning anything that authority claims to be true. When you are perpetrating a conspiracy you need to discredit the very word itself even though the dictionary definition of conspiracy is merely 'the activity of secretly planning with other people to do something bad or illegal' and 'a general agreement to keep silent about a subject for the purpose of keeping it secret'. On that basis there are conspiracies almost wherever you look. For obvious reasons the Cult and its lapdog media have to claim there are no conspiracies even though the word appears in state laws as with conspiracy to defraud, to murder, and to corrupt public morals.

Agent provocateurs are widely used by the Cult Deep State to manipulate genuine people into acting in ways that suit the desired outcome. By genuine in this case I mean protestors genuinely supporting Trump and claims that the election was stolen. In among them, however, were agents of the state wearing the garb of Trump supporters and QAnon to pump-prime the Capital riot which some genuine Trump supporters naively fell for. I described the situation as 'Come into my parlour said the spider to the fly'. Leaflets appeared through the Woke paramilitary arm Antifa, the anti-fascist fascists, calling on supporters to turn up in Washington looking like Trump supporters even though they hated him. Some of those arrested for breaching the Capitol Building were sourced to Antifa and its stable mate Black Lives Matter. Both organisations are funded by Cult billionaires and corporations. One man charged for the riot was according to his lawyer a former FBI agent who had held top secret security clearance for 40 years. Attorney Thomas Plofchan said of his client, 66-year-old Thomas Edward Caldwell:

He has held a Top Secret Security Clearance since 1979 and has undergone multiple Special Background Investigations in support of his clearances. After retiring from the Navy, he

worked as a section chief for the Federal Bureau of Investigation from 2009-2010 as a GS-12 [mid-level employee].

He also formed and operated a consulting firm performing work, often classified, for U.S government customers including the US. Drug Enforcement Agency, Department of Housing and Urban Development, the US Coast Guard, and the US Army Personnel Command.

A judge later released Caldwell pending trial in the absence of evidence about a conspiracy or that he tried to force his way into the building. *The New York Post* reported a 'law enforcement source' as saying that 'at least two known Antifa members were spotted' on camera among Trump supporters during the riot while one of the rioters arrested was John Earle Sullivan, a seriously extreme Black Lives Matter Trump-hater from Utah who was previously arrested and charged in July, 2020, over a BLM-Antifa riot in which drivers were threatened and one was shot. Sullivan is the founder of Utah-based Insurgence USA which is an affiliate of the Cult-created-and-funded Black Lives Matter movement. Footage appeared and was then deleted by Twitter of Trump supporters calling out Antifa infiltrators and a group was filmed changing into pro-Trump clothing before the riot. Security at the building was *pathetic* – as planned. Colonel Leroy Fletcher Prouty, a man with long experience in covert operations working with the US security apparatus, once described the tell-tale sign to identify who is involved in an assassination. He said:

No one has to direct an assassination – it happens. The active role is played secretly by permitting it to happen. This is the greatest single clue. Who has the power to call off or reduce the usual security precautions?

This principle applies to many other situations and certainly to the Capitol riot of January 6th, 2021.

The sting

With such a big and potentially angry crowd known to be gathering near the Capitol the security apparatus would have had a major police detail to defend the building with National Guard troops on

standby given the strength of feeling among people arriving from all over America encouraged by the QAnon Psyop and statements by Donald Trump. Instead Capitol Police 'security' was flimsy, weak, and easily breached. The same number of officers was deployed as on a regular day and that is a blatant red flag. They were not staffed or equipped for a possible riot that had been an obvious possibility in the circumstances. No protective and effective fencing worth the name was put in place and there were no contingency plans. The whole thing was basically a case of standing aside and waving people in. Once inside police mostly backed off apart from one Capitol police officer who ridiculously shot dead unarmed Air Force veteran protestor Ashli Babbitt without a warning as she climbed through a broken window. The 'investigation' refused to name or charge the officer after what must surely be considered a murder in the circumstances. They just lifted a carpet and swept. The story was endlessly repeated about five people dying in the 'armed insurrection' when there was no report of rioters using weapons. Apart from Babbitt the other four died from a heart attack, strokes and apparently a drug overdose. Capitol police officer Brian Sicknick was reported to have died after being bludgeoned with a fire extinguisher when he was alive after the riot was over and died later of what the Washington Medical Examiner's Office said was a stroke. Sicknick had no external injuries. The lies were delivered like rapid fire. There was a narrative to build with incessant repetition of the lie until the lie became the accepted 'everybody knows that' truth. The 'Big Lie' technique of Nazi Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels is constantly used by the Cult which was behind the Nazis and is today behind the 'Covid' and 'climate change' hoaxes. Goebbels said:

If you tell a lie big enough and keep repeating it, people will eventually come to believe it. The lie can be maintained only for such time as the State can shield the people from the political, economic and/or military consequences of the lie. It thus becomes vitally important for the State to use all of its powers to repress dissent, for the truth is the mortal enemy of the lie, and thus by extension, the truth is the greatest enemy of the State.

Most protestors had a free run of the Capitol Building. This allowed pictures to be taken of rioters in iconic parts of the building including the Senate chamber which could be used as propaganda images against all Pushbackers. One Congresswoman described the scene as 'the worst kind of non-security anybody could ever imagine'. Well, the first part was true, but someone obviously did imagine it and made sure it happened. Some photographs most widely circulated featured people wearing QAnon symbols and now the Psyop would be used to dub all QAnon followers with the ubiquitous fit-all label of 'white supremacist' and 'insurrectionists'. When a Muslim extremist called Noah Green drove his car at two police officers at the Capitol Building killing one in April, 2021, there was no such political and media hysteria. They were just disappointed he wasn't white.

The witch-hunt

Government prosecutor Michael Sherwin, an aggressive, dark-eyed, professional Rottweiler led the 'investigation' and to call it over the top would be to understate reality a thousand fold. Hundreds were tracked down and arrested for the crime of having the wrong political views and people were jailed who had done nothing more than walk in the building, committed no violence or damage to property, took a few pictures and left. They were labelled a 'threat to the Republic' while Biden sat in the White House signing executive orders written for him that were dismantling 'the Republic'. Even when judges ruled that a mother and son should not be in jail the government kept them there. Some of those arrested have been badly beaten by prison guards in Washington and lawyers for one man said he suffered a fractured skull and was made blind in one eye. Meanwhile a woman is shot dead for no reason by a Capitol Police officer and we are not allowed to know who he is never mind what has happened to him although that will be *nothing*. The Cult's QAnon/Trump sting to identify and isolate Pushbackers and then target them on the road to crushing and deleting them was a resounding success. You would have thought the Russians had

invaded the building at gunpoint and lined up senators for a firing squad to see the political and media reaction. Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez is a child in a woman's body, a terrible-twos, me, me, me, Woker narcissist of such proportions that words have no meaning. She said she thought she was going to die when 'insurrectionists' banged on her office door. It turned out she wasn't even in the Capitol Building when the riot was happening and the 'banging' was a Capitol Police officer. She referred to herself as a 'survivor' which is an insult to all those true survivors of violent and sexual abuse while she lives her pampered and privileged life talking drivel for a living. Her Woke colleague and fellow mega-narcissist Rashida Tlaib broke down describing the devastating effect on her, too, of *not being* in the building when the rioters were there. Ocasio-Cortez and Tlaib are members of a fully-Woke group of Congresswomen known as 'The Squad' along with Ilhan Omar and Ayanna Pressley. The Squad from what I can see can be identified by its vehement anti-white racism, anti-white men agenda, and, as always in these cases, the absence of brain cells on active duty.

The usual suspects were on the riot case immediately in the form of Democrat ultra-Zionist senators and operatives Chuck Schumer and Adam Schiff demanding that Trump be impeached for 'his part in the insurrection'. The same pair of prats had led the failed impeachment of Trump over the invented 'Russia collusion' nonsense which claimed Russia had helped Trump win the 2016 election. I didn't realise that Tel Aviv had been relocated just outside Moscow. I must find an up-to-date map. The Russia hoax was a Sabbatian operation to keep Trump occupied and impotent and to stop any rapport with Russia which the Cult wants to retain as a perceptual enemy to be pulled out at will. Puppet Biden began attacking Russia when he came to office as the Cult seeks more upheaval, division and war across the world. A two-year stage show 'Russia collusion inquiry' headed by the not-very-bright former 9/11 FBI chief Robert Mueller, with support from 19 lawyers, 40 FBI agents plus intelligence analysts, forensic accountants and other

staff, devoured tens of millions of dollars and found no evidence of Russia collusion which a ten-year-old could have told them on day one. Now the same moronic Schumer and Schiff wanted a second impeachment of Trump over the Capitol 'insurrection' (riot) which the arrested development of Schumer called another 'Pearl Harbor' while others compared it with 9/11 in which 3,000 died and, in the case of CNN, with the Rwandan genocide in the 1990s in which an estimated 500,000 to 600,000 were murdered, between 250, 000 and 500,000 women were raped, and populations of whole towns were hacked to death with machetes. To make those comparisons purely for Cult political reasons is beyond insulting to those that suffered and lost their lives and confirms yet again the callous inhumanity that we are dealing with. Schumer is a monumental idiot and so is Schiff, but they serve the Cult agenda and do whatever they're told so they get looked after. Talking of idiots – another inane man who spanned the Russia and Capitol impeachment attempts was Senator Eric Swalwell who had the nerve to accuse Trump of collusion with the Russians while sleeping with a Chinese spy called Christine Fang or 'Fang Fang' which is straight out of a Bond film no doubt starring Klaus Schwab as the bloke living on a secret island and controlling laser weapons positioned in space and pointing at world capitals. Fang Fang plays the part of Bond's infiltrator girlfriend which I'm sure she would enjoy rather more than sharing a bed with the brainless Swalwell, lying back and thinking of China. The FBI eventually warned Swalwell about Fang Fang which gave her time to escape back to the Chinese dictatorship. How very thoughtful of them. The second Trump impeachment also failed and hardly surprising when an impeachment is supposed to remove a sitting president and by the time it happened Trump was no longer president. These people are running your country America, well, officially anyway. Terrifying isn't it?

Outcomes tell the story - always

The outcome of all this – and it's the *outcome* on which Renegade Minds focus, not the words – was that a vicious, hysterical and

obviously pre-planned assault was launched on Pushbackers to censor, silence and discredit them and even targeted their right to earn a living. They have since been condemned as 'domestic terrorists' that need to be treated like Al-Qaeda and Islamic State. 'Domestic terrorists' is a label the Cult has been trying to make stick since the period of the Oklahoma bombing in 1995 which was blamed on 'far-right domestic terrorists'. If you read *The Trigger* you will see that the bombing was clearly a Problem-Reaction-Solution carried out by the Deep State during a Bill Clinton administration so corrupt that no dictionary definition of the term would even nearly suffice. Nearly 30, 000 troops were deployed from all over America to the empty streets of Washington for Biden's inauguration. Ten thousand of them stayed on with the pretext of protecting the capital from insurrectionists when it was more psychological programming to normalise the use of the military in domestic law enforcement in support of the Cult plan for a police-military state. Biden's fascist administration began a purge of 'wrong-thinkers' in the military which means anyone that is not on board with Woke. The Capitol Building was surrounded by a fence with razor wire and the Land of the Free was further symbolically and literally dismantled. The circle was completed with the installation of Biden and the exploitation of the QAnon Psyop.

America had never been so divided since the civil war of the 19th century, Pushbackers were isolated and dubbed terrorists and now, as was always going to happen, the Cult immediately set about deleting what little was left of freedom and transforming American society through a swish of the hand of the most controlled 'president' in American history leading (officially at least) the most extreme regime since the country was declared an independent state on July 4th, 1776. Biden issued undebated, dictatorial executive orders almost by the hour in his opening days in office across the whole spectrum of the Cult wish-list including diluting controls on the border with Mexico allowing thousands of migrants to illegally enter the United States to transform the demographics of America and import an election-changing number of perceived Democrat

voters. Then there were Biden deportation amnesties for the already illegally resident (estimated to be as high as 20 or even 30 million). A bill before Congress awarded American citizenship to anyone who could prove they had worked in agriculture for just 180 days in the previous two years as 'Big Ag' secured its slave labour long-term. There were the plans to add new states to the union such as Puerto Rico and making Washington DC a state. They are all parts of a plan to ensure that the Cult-owned Woke Democrats would be permanently in power.

Border – what border?

I have exposed in detail in other books how mass immigration into the United States and Europe is the work of Cult networks fuelled by the tens of billions spent to this and other ends by George Soros and his global Open Society (open borders) Foundations. The impact can be seen in America alone where the population has increased by *100 million* in little more than 30 years mostly through immigration. I wrote in *The Answer* that the plan was to have so many people crossing the southern border that the numbers become unstoppable and we are now there under Cult-owned Biden. El Salvador in Central America puts the scale of what is happening into context. A third of the population now lives in the United States, much of it illegally, and many more are on the way. The methodology is to crush Central and South American countries economically and spread violence through machete-wielding psychopathic gangs like MS-13 based in El Salvador and now operating in many American cities. Biden-imposed lax security at the southern border means that it is all but open. He said before his 'election' that he wanted to see a surge towards the border if he became president and that was the green light for people to do just that after election day to create the human disaster that followed for both America and the migrants. When that surge came the imbecilic Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez said it wasn't a 'surge' because they are 'children, not insurgents' and the term 'surge' (used by Biden) was a claim of 'white supremacists'.

This disingenuous lady may one day enter the realm of the most basic intelligence, but it won't be any time soon.

Sabbatians and the Cult are in the process of destroying America by importing violent people and gangs in among the genuine to terrorise American cities and by overwhelming services that cannot cope with the sheer volume of new arrivals. Something similar is happening in Europe as Western society in general is targeted for demographic and cultural transformation and upheaval. The plan demands violence and crime to create an environment of intimidation, fear and division and Soros has been funding the election of district attorneys across America who then stop prosecuting many crimes, reduce sentences for violent crimes and free as many violent criminals as they can. Sabbatians are creating the chaos from which order – their order – can respond in a classic Problem-Reaction-Solution. A Freemasonic moto says 'Ordo Ab Chao' (Order out of Chaos) and this is why the Cult is constantly creating chaos to impose a new 'order'. Here you have the reason the Cult is constantly creating chaos. The 'Covid' hoax can be seen with those entering the United States by plane being forced to take a 'Covid' test while migrants flooding through southern border processing facilities do not. Nothing is put in the way of mass migration and if that means ignoring the government's own 'Covid' rules then so be it. They know it's all bullshit anyway. Any pushback on this is denounced as 'racist' by Wokers and Sabbatian fronts like the ultra-Zionist Anti-Defamation League headed by the appalling Jonathan Greenblatt which at the same time argues that Israel should not give citizenship and voting rights to more Palestinian Arabs or the 'Jewish population' (in truth the Sabbatian network) will lose control of the country.

Society-changing numbers

Biden's masters have declared that countries like El Salvador are so dangerous that their people must be allowed into the United States for humanitarian reasons when there are fewer murders in large parts of many Central American countries than in US cities like

Baltimore. That is not to say Central America cannot be a dangerous place and Cult-controlled American governments have been making it so since way back, along with the dismantling of economies, in a long-term plan to drive people north into the United States. Parts of Central America are very dangerous, but in other areas the story is being greatly exaggerated to justify relaxing immigration criteria. Migrants are being offered free healthcare and education in the United States as another incentive to head for the border and there is no requirement to be financially independent before you can enter to prevent the resources of America being drained. You can't blame migrants for seeking what they believe will be a better life, but they are being played by the Cult for dark and nefarious ends. The numbers since Biden took office are huge. In February, 2021, more than 100,000 people were known to have tried to enter the US illegally through the southern border (it was 34,000 in the same month in 2020) and in March it was 170,000 – a 418 percent increase on March, 2020. These numbers are only known people, not the ones who get in unseen. The true figure for migrants illegally crossing the border in a single month was estimated by one congressman at 250,000 and that number will only rise under Biden's current policy. Gangs of murdering drug-running thugs that control the Mexican side of the border demand money – thousands of dollars – to let migrants cross the Rio Grande into America. At the same time gun battles are breaking out on the border several times a week between rival Mexican drug gangs (which now operate globally) who are equipped with sophisticated military-grade weapons, grenades and armoured vehicles. While the Capitol Building was being 'protected' from a non-existent 'threat' by thousands of troops, and others were still deployed at the time in the Cult Neocon war in Afghanistan, the southern border of America was left to its fate. This is not incompetence, it is cold calculation.

By March, 2021, there were 17,000 unaccompanied children held at border facilities and many of them are ensnared by people traffickers for paedophile rings and raped on their journey north to America. This is not conjecture – this is fact. Many of those designated

children are in reality teenage boys or older. Meanwhile Wokers posture their self-purity for encouraging poor and tragic people to come to America and face this nightmare both on the journey and at the border with the disgusting figure of House Speaker Nancy Pelosi giving disingenuous speeches about caring for migrants. The woman's evil. Wokers condemned Trump for having children in cages at the border (so did Obama, *Shhhh*), but now they are sleeping on the floor without access to a shower with one border facility 729 percent over capacity. The Biden insanity even proposed flying migrants from the southern border to the northern border with Canada for 'processing'. The whole shambles is being overseen by ultra-Zionist Secretary of Homeland Security, the moronic liar Alejandro Mayorkas, who banned news cameras at border facilities to stop Americans seeing what was happening. Mayorkas said there was not a ban on news crews; it was just that they were not allowed to film. Alongside him at Homeland Security is another ultra-Zionist Cass Sunstein appointed by Biden to oversee new immigration laws. Sunstein despises conspiracy researchers to the point where he suggests they should be banned or *taxed* for having such views. The man is not bonkers or anything. He's perfectly well-adjusted, but adjusted to what is the question. Criticise what is happening and you are a 'white supremacist' when earlier non-white immigrants also oppose the numbers which effect their lives and opportunities. Black people in poor areas are particularly damaged by uncontrolled immigration and the increased competition for work opportunities with those who will work for less. They are also losing voting power as Hispanics become more dominant in former black areas. It's a downward spiral for them while the billionaires behind the policy drone on about how much they care about black people and 'racism'. None of this is about compassion for migrants or black people – that's just wind and air. Migrants are instead being mercilessly exploited to transform America while the countries they leave are losing their future and the same is true in Europe. Mass immigration may now be the work of Woke Democrats, but it can be traced back to the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act (it

wasn't) signed into law by Republican hero President Ronald Reagan which gave amnesty to millions living in the United States illegally and other incentives for people to head for the southern border. Here we have the one-party state at work again.

Save me syndrome

Almost every aspect of what I have been exposing as the Cult agenda was on display in even the first days of 'Biden' with silencing of Pushbackers at the forefront of everything. A Renegade Mind will view the Trump years and QAnon in a very different light to their supporters and advocates as the dots are connected. The QAnon/Trump Psyop has given the Cult all it was looking for. We may not know how much, or little, that Trump realised he was being used, but that's a side issue. This pincer movement produced the desired outcome of dividing America and having Pushbackers isolated. To turn this around we have to look at new routes to empowerment which do not include handing our power to other people and groups through what I will call the 'Save Me Syndrome' – 'I want someone else to do it so that I don't have to'. We have seen this at work throughout human history and the QAnon/Trump Psyop is only the latest incarnation alongside all the others. Religion is an obvious expression of this when people look to a 'god' or priest to save them or tell them how to be saved and then there are 'save me' politicians like Trump. Politics is a diversion and not a 'saviour'. It is a means to block positive change, not make it possible.

Save Me Syndrome always comes with the same repeating theme of handing your power to whom or what you believe will save you while your real 'saviour' stares back from the mirror every morning. Renegade Minds are constantly vigilant in this regard and always asking the question 'What can I do?' rather than 'What can someone else do for me?' Gandhi was right when he said: 'You must be the change you want to see in the world.' We are indeed the people we have been waiting for. We are presented with a constant raft of reasons to concede that power to others and forget where the real power is. Humanity has the numbers and the Cult does not. It has to

use diversion and division to target the unstoppable power that comes from unity. Religions, governments, politicians, corporations, media, QAnon, are all different manifestations of this power-diversion and dilution. Refusing to give your power to governments and instead handing it to Trump and QAnon is not to take a new direction, but merely to recycle the old one with new names on the posters. I will explore this phenomenon as we proceed and how to break the cycles and recycles that got us here through the mists of repeating perception and so repeating history.

For now we shall turn to the most potent example in the entire human story of the consequences that follow when you give your power away. I am talking, of course, of the 'Covid' hoax.

CHAPTER FOUR

'Covid': Calculated catastrophe

Facts are threatening to those invested in fraud
DaShanne Stokes

We can easily unravel the real reason for the 'Covid pandemic' hoax by employing the Renegade Mind methodology that I have outlined this far. We'll start by comparing the long-planned Cult outcome with the 'Covid pandemic' outcome. Know the outcome and you'll see the journey.

I have highlighted the plan for the Hunger Games Society which has been in my books for so many years with the very few controlling the very many through ongoing dependency. To create this dependency it is essential to destroy independent livelihoods, businesses and employment to make the population reliant on the state (the Cult) for even the basics of life through a guaranteed pittance income. While independence of income remained these Cult ambitions would be thwarted. With this knowledge it was easy to see where the 'pandemic' hoax was going once talk of 'lockdowns' began and the closing of all but perceived 'essential' businesses to 'save' us from an alleged 'deadly virus'. Cult corporations like Amazon and Walmart were naturally considered 'essential' while mom and pop shops and stores had their doors closed by fascist decree. As a result with every new lockdown and new regulation more small and medium, even large businesses not owned by the Cult, went to the wall while Cult giants and their frontmen and women grew financially fatter by the second. Mom and pop were

denied an income and the right to earn a living and the wealth of people like Jeff Bezos (Amazon), Mark Zuckerberg (Facebook) and Sergei Brin and Larry Page (Google/Alphabet) have reached record levels. The Cult was increasing its own power through further dramatic concentrations of wealth while the competition was being destroyed and brought into a state of dependency. Lockdowns have been instigated to secure that very end and were never anything to do with health. My brother Paul spent 45 years building up a bus repair business, but lockdowns meant buses were running at a fraction of normal levels for months on end. Similar stories can told in their hundreds of millions worldwide. Efforts of a lifetime coldly destroyed by Cult multi-billionaires and their lackeys in government and law enforcement who continued to earn their living from the taxation of the people while denying the right of the same people to earn theirs. How different it would have been if those making and enforcing these decisions had to face the same financial hardships of those they affected, but they never do.

Gates of Hell

Behind it all in the full knowledge of what he is doing and why is the psychopathic figure of Cult operative Bill Gates. His puppet Tedros at the World Health Organization declared 'Covid' a pandemic in March, 2020. The WHO had changed the definition of a 'pandemic' in 2009 just a month before declaring the 'swine flu pandemic' which would not have been so under the previous definition. The same applies to 'Covid'. The definition had included… 'an infection by an infectious agent, occurring simultaneously in different countries, with a significant mortality rate relative to the proportion of the population infected'. The new definition removed the need for 'significant mortality'. The 'pandemic' has been fraudulent even down to the definition, but Gates demanded economy-destroying lockdowns, school closures, social distancing, mandatory masks, a 'vaccination' for every man, woman and child on the planet and severe consequences and restrictions for those that refused. Who gave him this power? The

Cult did which he serves like a little boy in short trousers doing what his daddy tells him. He and his psychopathic missus even smiled when they said that much worse was to come (what they knew was planned to come). Gates responded in the matter-of-fact way of all psychopaths to a question about the effect on the world economy of what he was doing:

> Well, it won't go to zero but it will shrink. Global GDP is probably going to take the biggest hit ever [Gates was smiling as he said this] … in my lifetime this will be the greatest economic hit. But you don't have a choice. People act as if you have a choice. People don't feel like going to the stadium when they might get infected … People are deeply affected by seeing these stats, by knowing they could be part of the transmission chain, old people, their parents and grandparents, could be affected by this, and so you don't get to say ignore what is going on here.
>
> There will be the ability to open up, particularly in rich countries, if things are done well over the next few months, but for the world at large normalcy only returns when we have largely vaccinated the entire population.

The man has no compassion or empathy. How could he when he's a psychopath like all Cult players? My own view is that even beyond that he is very seriously mentally ill. Look in his eyes and you can see this along with his crazy flailing arms. You don't do what he has done to the world population since the start of 2020 unless you are mentally ill and at the most extreme end of psychopathic. You especially don't do it when to you know, as we shall see, that cases and deaths from 'Covid' are fakery and a product of monumental figure massaging. 'These stats' that Gates referred to are based on a 'test' that's not testing for the 'virus' as he has known all along. He made his fortune with big Cult support as an infamously ruthless software salesman and now buys global control of 'health' (death) policy without the population he affects having any say. It's a breathtaking outrage. Gates talked about people being deeply affected by fear of 'Covid' when that was because of *him* and his global network lying to them minute-by-minute supported by a lying media that he seriously influences and funds to the tune of hundreds of millions. He's handed big sums to media operations including the BBC, NBC, Al Jazeera, Univision, *PBS NewsHour*,

ProPublica, National Journal, The Guardian, The Financial Times, The Atlantic, Texas Tribune, USA Today publisher Gannett, *Washington Monthly, Le Monde,* Center for Investigative Reporting, Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting, National Press Foundation, International Center for Journalists, Solutions Journalism Network, the Poynter Institute for Media Studies, and many more. Gates is everywhere in the 'Covid' hoax and the man must go to prison – or a mental facility – for the rest of his life and his money distributed to those he has taken such enormous psychopathic pleasure in crushing.

The Muscle

The Hunger Games global structure demands a police-military state – a fusion of the two into one force – which viciously imposes the will of the Cult on the population and protects the Cult from public rebellion. In that regard, too, the 'Covid' hoax just keeps on giving. Often unlawful, ridiculous and contradictory 'Covid' rules and regulations have been policed across the world by moronic automatons and psychopaths made faceless by face-nappy masks and acting like the Nazi SS and fascist blackshirts and brownshirts of Hitler and Mussolini. The smallest departure from the rules decreed by the psychos in government and their clueless gofers were jumped upon by the face-nappy fascists. Brutality against public protestors soon became commonplace even on girls, women and old people as the brave men with the batons – the Face-Nappies as I call them – broke up peaceful protests and handed out fines like confetti to people who couldn't earn a living let alone pay hundreds of pounds for what was once an accepted human right. Robot Face-Nappies of Nottingham police in the English East Midlands fined one group £11,000 for attending a child's birthday party. For decades I charted the transformation of law enforcement as genuine, decent officers were replaced with psychopaths and the brain dead who would happily and brutally do whatever their masters told them. Now they were let loose on the public and I would emphasise the point that none of this just happened. The step-by-step change in the dynamic between police and public was orchestrated from the shadows by

those who knew where this was all going and the same with the perceptual reframing of those in all levels of authority and official administration through 'training courses' by organisations such as Common Purpose which was created in the late 1980s and given a massive boost in Blair era Britain until it became a global phenomenon. Supposed public 'servants' began to view the population as the enemy and the same was true of the police. This was the start of the explosion of behaviour manipulation organisations and networks preparing for the all-war on the human psyche unleashed with the dawn of 2020. I will go into more detail about this later in the book because it is a core part of what is happening.

Police desecrated beauty spots to deter people gathering and arrested women for walking in the countryside alone 'too far' from their homes. We had arrogant, clueless sergeants in the Isle of Wight police where I live posting on Facebook what they insisted the population must do or else. A schoolmaster sergeant called Radford looked young enough for me to ask if his mother knew he was out, but he was posting what he *expected* people to do while a Sergeant Wilkinson boasted about fining lads for meeting in a McDonald's car park where they went to get a lockdown takeaway. Wilkinson added that he had even cancelled their order. What a pair of prats these people are and yet they have increasingly become the norm among Jackboot Johnson's Yellowshirts once known as the British police. This was the theme all over the world with police savagery common during lockdown protests in the United States, the Netherlands, and the fascist state of Victoria in Australia under its tyrannical and again moronic premier Daniel Andrews. Amazing how tyrannical and moronic tend to work as a team and the same combination could be seen across America as arrogant, narcissistic Woke governors and mayors such as Gavin Newsom (California), Andrew Cuomo (New York), Gretchen Whitmer (Michigan), Lori Lightfoot (Chicago) and Eric Garcetti (Los Angeles) did their Nazi and Stalin impressions with the full support of the compliant brutality of their enforcers in uniform as they arrested small business owners defying

fascist shutdown orders and took them to jail in ankle shackles and handcuffs. This happened to bistro owner Marlena Pavlos-Hackney in Gretchen Whitmer's fascist state of Michigan when police arrived to enforce an order by a state-owned judge for 'putting the community at risk' at a time when other states like Texas were dropping restrictions and migrants were pouring across the southern border without any 'Covid' questions at all. I'm sure there are many officers appalled by what they are ordered to do, but not nearly enough of them. If they were truly appalled they would not do it. As the months passed every opportunity was taken to have the military involved to make their presence on the streets ever more familiar and 'normal' for the longer-term goal of police-military fusion.

Another crucial element to the Hunger Games enforcement network has been encouraging the public to report neighbours and others for 'breaking the lockdown rules'. The group faced with £11,000 in fines at the child's birthday party would have been dobbed-in by a neighbour with a brain the size of a pea. The technique was most famously employed by the Stasi secret police in communist East Germany who had public informants placed throughout the population. A police chief in the UK says his force doesn't need to carry out 'Covid' patrols when they are flooded with so many calls from the public reporting other people for visiting the beach. Dorset police chief James Vaughan said people were so enthusiastic about snitching on their fellow humans they were now operating as an auxiliary arm of the police: 'We are still getting around 400 reports a week from the public, so we will respond to reports …We won't need to be doing hotspot patrols because people are very quick to pick the phone up and tell us.' Vaughan didn't say that this is a pillar of all tyrannies of whatever complexion and the means to hugely extend the reach of enforcement while spreading distrust among the people and making them wary of doing anything that might get them reported. Those narcissistic Isle of Wight sergeants Radford and Wilkinson never fail to add a link to their Facebook posts where the public can inform on their fellow slaves.

Neither would be self-aware enough to realise they were imitating the Stasi which they might well never have heard of. Government psychologists that I will expose later laid out a policy to turn communities against each other in the same way.

A coincidence? Yep, and I can knit fog

I knew from the start of the alleged pandemic that this was a Cult operation. It presented limitless potential to rapidly advance the Cult agenda and exploit manipulated fear to demand that every man, woman and child on the planet was 'vaccinated' in a process never used on humans before which infuses self-replicating *synthetic* material into human cells. Remember the plan to transform the human body from a biological to a synthetic biological state. I'll deal with the 'vaccine' (that's not actually a vaccine) when I focus on the genetic agenda. Enough to say here that mass global 'vaccination' justified by this 'new virus' set alarms ringing after 30 years of tracking these people and their methods. The 'Covid' hoax officially beginning in China was also a big red flag for reasons I will be explaining. The agenda potential was so enormous that I could dismiss any idea that the 'virus' appeared naturally. Major happenings with major agenda implications never occur without Cult involvement in making them happen. My questions were twofold in early 2020 as the media began its campaign to induce global fear and hysteria: Was this alleged infectious agent released on purpose by the Cult or did it even exist at all? I then did what I always do in these situations. I sat, observed and waited to see where the evidence and information would take me. By March and early April synchronicity was strongly – and ever more so since then – pointing me in the direction of *there is no 'virus'*. I went public on that with derision even from swathes of the alternative media that voiced a scenario that the Chinese government released the 'virus' in league with Deep State elements in the United States from a top-level bio-lab in Wuhan where the 'virus' is said to have first appeared. I looked at that possibility, but I didn't buy it for several reasons. Deaths from the 'virus' did not in any way match what they

would have been with a 'deadly bioweapon' and it is much more effective if you sell the *illusion* of an infectious agent rather than having a real one unless you can control through injection who has it and who doesn't. Otherwise you lose control of events. A made-up 'virus' gives you a blank sheet of paper on which you can make it do whatever you like and have any symptoms or mutant 'variants' you choose to add while a real infectious agent would limit you to what it actually does. A phantom disease allows you to have endless ludicrous 'studies' on the 'Covid' dollar to widen the perceived impact by inventing ever more 'at risk' groups including one study which said those who walk slowly may be almost four times more likely to die from the 'virus'. People are in psychiatric wards for less.

A real 'deadly bioweapon' can take out people in the hierarchy that are not part of the Cult, but essential to its operation. Obviously they don't want that. Releasing a real disease means you immediately lose control of it. Releasing an illusory one means you don't. Again it's vital that people are extra careful when dealing with what they want to hear. A bioweapon unleashed from a Chinese laboratory in collusion with the American Deep State may fit a conspiracy narrative, but is it true? Would it not be far more effective to use the excuse of a 'virus' to justify the real bioweapon – the 'vaccine'? That way your disease agent does not have to be transmitted and arrives directly through a syringe. I saw a French virologist Luc Montagnier quoted in the alternative media as saying he had discovered that the alleged 'new' severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus , or SARS-CoV-2, was made artificially and included elements of the human immunodeficiency 'virus' (HIV) and a parasite that causes malaria. SARS-CoV-2 is alleged to trigger an alleged illness called Covid-19. I remembered Montagnier's name from my research years before into claims that an HIV 'retrovirus' causes AIDs – claims that were demolished by Berkeley virologist Peter Duesberg who showed that no one had ever proved that HIV causes acquired immunodeficiency syndrome or AIDS. Claims that become accepted as fact, publicly and medically, with no proof whatsoever are an ever-recurring story that profoundly applies to

'Covid'. Nevertheless, despite the lack of proof, Montagnier's team at the Pasteur Institute in Paris had a long dispute with American researcher Robert Gallo over which of them discovered and isolated the HIV 'virus' and with *no evidence* found it to cause AIDS. You will see later that there is also no evidence that any 'virus' causes any disease or that there is even such a thing as a 'virus' in the way it is said to exist. The claim to have 'isolated' the HIV 'virus' will be presented in its real context as we come to the shocking story – and it is a story – of SARS-CoV-2 and so will Montagnier's assertion that he identified the full SARS-CoV-2 genome.

Hoax in the making

We can pick up the 'Covid' story in 2010 and the publication by the Rockefeller Foundation of a document called 'Scenarios for the Future of Technology and International Development'. The inner circle of the Rockefeller family has been serving the Cult since John D. Rockefeller (1839-1937) made his fortune with Standard Oil. It is less well known that the same Rockefeller – the Bill Gates of his day – was responsible for establishing what is now referred to as 'Big Pharma', the global network of pharmaceutical companies that make outrageous profits dispensing scalpel and drug 'medicine' and are obsessed with pumping vaccines in ever-increasing number into as many human arms and backsides as possible. John D. Rockefeller was the driving force behind the creation of the 'education' system in the United States and elsewhere specifically designed to program the perceptions of generations thereafter. The Rockefeller family donated exceptionally valuable land in New York for the United Nations building and were central in establishing the World Health Organization in 1948 as an agency of the UN which was created from the start as a Trojan horse and stalking horse for world government. Now enter Bill Gates. His family and the Rockefellers have long been extremely close and I have seen genealogy which claims that if you go back far enough the two families fuse into the same bloodline. Gates has said that the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation was inspired by the Rockefeller Foundation and why not

when both are serving the same Cult? Major tax-exempt foundations are overwhelmingly criminal enterprises in which Cult assets fund the Cult agenda in the guise of 'philanthropy' while avoiding tax in the process. Cult operatives can become mega-rich in their role of front men and women for the psychopaths at the inner core and they, too, have to be psychopaths to knowingly serve such evil. Part of the deal is that a big percentage of the wealth gleaned from representing the Cult has to be spent advancing the ambitions of the Cult and hence you have the Rockefeller Foundation, Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (and *so* many more) and people like George Soros with his global Open Society Foundations spending their billions in pursuit of global Cult control. Gates is a global public face of the Cult with his interventions in world affairs including Big Tech influence; a central role in the 'Covid' and 'vaccine' scam; promotion of the climate change shakedown; manipulation of education; geoengineering of the skies; and his food-control agenda as the biggest owner of farmland in America, his GMO promotion and through other means. As one writer said: 'Gates monopolizes or wields disproportionate influence over the tech industry, global health and vaccines, agriculture and food policy (including biopiracy and fake food), weather modification and other climate technologies, surveillance, education and media.' The almost limitless wealth secured through Microsoft and other not-allowed-to-fail ventures (including vaccines) has been ploughed into a long, long list of Cult projects designed to enslave the entire human race. Gates and the Rockefellers have been working as one unit with the Rockefeller-established World Health Organization leading global 'Covid' policy controlled by Gates through his mouth-piece Tedros. Gates became the WHO's biggest funder when Trump announced that the American government would cease its donations, but Biden immediately said he would restore the money when he took office in January, 2021. The Gates Foundation (the Cult) owns through limitless funding the world health system and the major players across the globe in the 'Covid' hoax.

Okay, with that background we return to that Rockefeller Foundation document of 2010 headed 'Scenarios for the Future of Technology and International Development' and its 'imaginary' epidemic of a virulent and deadly influenza strain which infected 20 percent of the global population and killed eight million in seven months. The Rockefeller scenario was that the epidemic destroyed economies, closed shops, offices and other businesses and led to governments imposing fierce rules and restrictions that included mandatory wearing of face masks and body-temperature checks to enter communal spaces like railway stations and supermarkets. The document predicted that even after the height of the Rockefeller-envisaged epidemic the authoritarian rule would continue to deal with further pandemics, transnational terrorism, environmental crises and rising poverty. Now you may think that the Rockefellers are our modern-day seers or alternatively, and rather more likely, that they well knew what was planned a few years further on. Fascism had to be imposed, you see, to 'protect citizens from risk and exposure'. The Rockefeller scenario document said:

During the pandemic, national leaders around the world flexed their authority and imposed airtight rules and restrictions, from the mandatory wearing of face masks to body-temperature checks at the entries to communal spaces like train stations and supermarkets. Even after the pandemic faded, this more authoritarian control and oversight of citizens and their activities stuck and even intensified. In order to protect themselves from the spread of increasingly global problems – from pandemics and transnational terrorism to environmental crises and rising poverty – leaders around the world took a firmer grip on power.

At first, the notion of a more controlled world gained wide acceptance and approval. Citizens willingly gave up some of their sovereignty – and their privacy – to more paternalistic states in exchange for greater safety and stability. Citizens were more tolerant, and even eager, for top-down direction and oversight, and national leaders had more latitude to impose order in the ways they saw fit.

In developed countries, this heightened oversight took many forms: biometric IDs for all citizens, for example, and tighter regulation of key industries whose stability was deemed vital to national interests. In many developed countries, enforced cooperation with a suite of new regulations and agreements slowly but steadily restored both order and, importantly, economic growth.

There we have the prophetic Rockefellers in 2010 and three years later came their paper for the Global Health Summit in Beijing, China, when government representatives, the private sector, international organisations and groups met to discuss the next 100 years of 'global health'. The Rockefeller Foundation-funded paper was called 'Dreaming the Future of Health for the Next 100 Years and more prophecy ensued as it described a dystopian future: 'The abundance of data, digitally tracking and linking people may mean the 'death of privacy' and may replace physical interaction with transient, virtual connection, generating isolation and raising questions of how values are shaped in virtual networks.' Next in the 'Covid' hoax preparation sequence came a 'table top' simulation in 2018 for another 'imaginary' pandemic of a disease called Clade X which was said to kill 900 million people. The exercise was organised by the Gates-funded Johns Hopkins University's Center for Health Security in the United States and this is the very same university that has been compiling the disgustingly and systematically erroneous global figures for 'Covid' cases and deaths. Similar Johns Hopkins health crisis scenarios have included the Dark Winter exercise in 2001 and Atlantic Storm in 2005.

Nostradamus 201

For sheer predictive genius look no further prophecy-watchers than the Bill Gates-funded Event 201 held only six weeks before the 'coronavirus pandemic' is supposed to have broken out in China and Event 201 was based on a scenario of a global 'coronavirus pandemic'. Melinda Gates, the great man's missus, told the BBC that he had 'prepared for years' for a coronavirus pandemic which told us what we already knew. Nostradamugates had predicted in a TED talk in 2015 that a pandemic was coming that would kill a lot of people and demolish the world economy. My god, the man is a machine – possibly even literally. Now here he was only weeks before the real thing funding just such a simulated scenario and involving his friends and associates at Johns Hopkins, the World Economic Forum Cult-front of Klaus Schwab, the United Nations,

Johnson & Johnson, major banks, and officials from China and the Centers for Disease Control in the United States. What synchronicity – Johns Hopkins would go on to compile the fraudulent 'Covid' figures, the World Economic Forum and Schwab would push the 'Great Reset' in response to 'Covid', the Centers for Disease Control would be at the forefront of 'Covid' policy in the United States, Johnson & Johnson would produce a 'Covid vaccine', and everything would officially start just weeks later in China. Spooky, eh? They were even accurate in creating a simulation of a 'virus' pandemic because the 'real thing' would also be a simulation. Event 201 was not an exercise preparing for something that might happen; it was a rehearsal for what those in control knew was *going* to happen and very shortly. Hours of this simulation were posted on the Internet and the various themes and responses mirrored what would soon be imposed to transform human society. News stories were inserted and what they said would be commonplace a few weeks later with still more prophecy perfection. Much discussion focused on the need to deal with misinformation and the 'anti-vax movement' which is exactly what happened when the 'virus' arrived – was said to have arrived – in the West.

Cult-owned social media banned criticism and exposure of the official 'virus' narrative and when I said there *was* no 'virus' in early April, 2020, I was banned by one platform after another including YouTube, Facebook and later Twitter. The mainstream broadcast media in Britain was in effect banned from interviewing me by the Tony-Blair-created government broadcasting censor Ofcom headed by career government bureaucrat Melanie Dawes who was appointed just as the 'virus' hoax was about to play out in January, 2020. At the same time the Ickonic media platform was using Vimeo, another ultra-Zionist-owned operation, while our own player was being created and they deleted in an instant hundreds of videos, documentaries, series and shows to confirm their unbelievable vindictiveness. We had copies, of course, and they had to be restored one by one when our player was ready. These people have no class. Sabbatian Facebook promised free advertisements for the Gates-

controlled World Health Organization narrative while deleting 'false claims and conspiracy theories' to stop 'misinformation' about the alleged coronavirus. All these responses could be seen just a short while earlier in the scenarios of Event 201. Extreme censorship was absolutely crucial for the Cult because the official story was so ridiculous and unsupportable by the evidence that it could never survive open debate and the free-flow of information and opinion. If you can't win a debate then don't have one is the Cult's approach throughout history. Facebook's little boy front man – front boy – Mark Zuckerberg equated 'credible and accurate information' with official sources and exposing their lies with 'misinformation'.

Silencing those that can see

The censorship dynamic of Event 201 is now the norm with an army of narrative-supporting 'fact-checker' organisations whose entire reason for being is to tell the public that official narratives are true and those exposing them are lying. One of the most appalling of these 'fact-checkers' is called NewsGuard founded by ultra-Zionist Americans Gordon Crovitz and Steven Brill. Crovitz is a former publisher of *The Wall Street Journal*, former Executive Vice President of Dow Jones, a member of the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR), and on the board of the American Association of Rhodes Scholars. The CFR and Rhodes Scholarships, named after Rothschild agent Cecil Rhodes who plundered the gold and diamonds of South Africa for his masters and the Cult, have featured widely in my books. NewsGuard don't seem to like me for some reason – I really can't think why – and they have done all they can to have me censored and discredited which is, to quote an old British politician, like being savaged by a dead sheep. They are, however, like all in the censorship network, very well connected and funded by organisations themselves funded by, or connected to, Bill Gates. As you would expect with anything associated with Gates NewsGuard has an offshoot called HealthGuard which 'fights online health care hoaxes'. How very kind. Somehow the NewsGuard European Managing Director Anna-Sophie Harling, a remarkably young-

looking woman with no broadcasting experience and little hands-on work in journalism, has somehow secured a position on the 'Content Board' of UK government broadcast censor Ofcom. An executive of an organisation seeking to discredit dissidents of the official narratives is making decisions for the government broadcast 'regulator' about content?? Another appalling 'fact-checker' is Full Fact funded by George Soros and global censors Google and Facebook.

It's amazing how many activists in the 'fact-checking', 'anti-hate', arena turn up in government-related positions – people like UK Labour Party activist Imran Ahmed who heads the Center for Countering Digital Hate founded by people like Morgan McSweeney, now chief of staff to the Labour Party's hapless and useless 'leader' Keir Starmer. Digital Hate – which is what it really is – uses the American spelling of Center to betray its connection to a transatlantic network of similar organisations which in 2020 shapeshifted from attacking people for 'hate' to attacking them for questioning the 'Covid' hoax and the dangers of the 'Covid vaccine'. It's just a coincidence, you understand. This is one of Imran Ahmed's hysterical statements: 'I would go beyond calling anti-vaxxers conspiracy theorists to say they are an extremist group that pose a national security risk.' No one could ever accuse this prat of understatement and he's including in that those parents who are now against vaccines after their children were damaged for life or killed by them. He's such a nice man. Ahmed does the rounds of the Woke media getting soft-ball questions from spineless 'journalists' who never ask what right he has to campaign to destroy the freedom of speech of others while he demands it for himself. There also seems to be an overrepresentation in Ofcom of people connected to the narrative-worshipping BBC. This incredible global network of narrative-support was super-vital when the 'Covid' hoax was played in the light of the mega-whopper lies that have to be defended from the spotlight cast by the most basic intelligence.

Setting the scene

The Cult plays the long game and proceeds step-by-step ensuring that everything is in place before major cards are played and they don't come any bigger than the 'Covid' hoax. The psychopaths can't handle events where the outcome isn't certain and as little as possible – preferably nothing – is left to chance. Politicians, government and medical officials who would follow direction were brought to illusory power in advance by the Cult web whether on the national stage or others like state governors and mayors of America. For decades the dynamic between officialdom, law enforcement and the public was changed from one of service to one of control and dictatorship. Behaviour manipulation networks established within government were waiting to impose the coming 'Covid' rules and regulations specifically designed to subdue and rewire the psyche of the people in the guise of protecting health. These included in the UK the Behavioural Insights Team part-owned by the British government Cabinet Office; the Scientific Pandemic Insights Group on Behaviours (SPI-B); and a whole web of intelligence and military groups seeking to direct the conversation on social media and control the narrative. Among them are the cyberwarfare (on the people) 77th Brigade of the British military which is also coordinated through the Cabinet Office as civilian and military leadership continues to combine in what they call the Fusion Doctrine. The 77th Brigade is a British equivalent of the infamous Israeli (Sabbatian) military cyberwarfare and Internet manipulation operation Unit 8200 which I expose at length in *The Trigger*. Also carefully in place were the medical and science advisers to government – many on the payroll past or present of Bill Gates – and a whole alternative structure of unelected government stood by to take control when elected parliaments were effectively closed down once the 'Covid' card was slammed on the table. The structure I have described here and so much more was installed in every major country through the Cult networks. The top-down control hierarchy looks like this: The Cult – Cult-owned Gates – the World Health Organization and Tedros – Gates-funded or controlled chief medical officers and science 'advisers' (dictators) in each country –

political 'leaders'– law enforcement – The People. Through this simple global communication and enforcement structure the policy of the Cult could be imposed on virtually the entire human population so long as they acquiesced to the fascism. With everything in place it was time for the button to be pressed in late 2019/early 2020.

These were the prime goals the Cult had to secure for its will to prevail:

1) Locking down economies, closing all but designated 'essential' businesses (Cult-owned corporations were 'essential'), and putting the population under house arrest was an imperative to destroy independent income and employment and ensure dependency on the Cult-controlled state in the Hunger Games Society. Lockdowns had to be established as the global blueprint from the start to respond to the 'virus' and followed by pretty much the entire world.

2) The global population had to be terrified into believing in a deadly 'virus' that didn't actually exist so they would unquestioningly obey authority in the belief that authority must know how best to protect them and their families. Software salesman Gates would suddenly morph into the world's health expert and be promoted as such by the Cult-owned media.

3) A method of testing that wasn't testing for the 'virus', but was only claimed to be, had to be in place to provide the illusion of 'cases' and subsequent 'deaths' that had a very different cause to the 'Covid-19' that would be scribbled on the death certificate.

4) Because there was no 'virus' and the great majority testing positive with a test not testing for the 'virus' would have no symptoms of anything the lie had to be sold that people without symptoms (without the 'virus') could still pass it on to others. This was crucial to justify for the first time quarantining – house arresting – healthy people. Without this the economy-destroying lockdown of *everybody* could not have been credibly sold.

5) The 'saviour' had to be seen as a vaccine which beyond evil drug companies were working like angels of mercy to develop as quickly as possible, with all corners cut, to save the day. The public must absolutely not know that the 'vaccine' had nothing to do with a 'virus' or that the contents were ready and waiting with a very different motive long before the 'Covid' card was even lifted from the pack.

I said in March, 2020, that the 'vaccine' would have been created way ahead of the 'Covid' hoax which justified its use and the following December an article in the New York *Intelligencer* magazine said the Moderna 'vaccine' had been 'designed' by

January, 2020. This was 'before China had even acknowledged that the disease could be transmitted from human to human, more than a week before the first confirmed coronavirus case in the United States'. The article said that by the time the first American death was announced a month later 'the vaccine had already been manufactured and shipped to the National Institutes of Health for the beginning of its Phase I clinical trial'. The 'vaccine' was actually 'designed' long before that although even with this timescale you would expect the article to ask how on earth it could have been done that quickly. Instead it asked why the 'vaccine' had not been rolled out then and not months later. Journalism in the mainstream is truly dead. I am going to detail in the next chapter why the 'virus' has never existed and how a hoax on that scale was possible, but first the foundation on which the Big Lie of 'Covid' was built.

The test that doesn't test

Fraudulent 'testing' is the bottom line of the whole 'Covid' hoax and was the means by which a 'virus' that did not exist *appeared* to exist. They could only achieve this magic trick by using a test not testing for the 'virus'. To use a test that *was* testing for the 'virus' would mean that every test would come back negative given there was no 'virus'. They chose to exploit something called the RT-PCR test invented by American biochemist Kary Mullis in the 1980s who said publicly that his PCR test … *cannot detect infectious disease*. Yes, the 'test' used worldwide to detect infectious 'Covid' to produce all the illusory 'cases' and 'deaths' compiled by Johns Hopkins and others *cannot detect infectious disease*. This fact came from the mouth of the man who invented PCR and was awarded the Nobel Prize in Chemistry in 1993 for doing so. Sadly, and incredibly conveniently for the Cult, Mullis died in August, 2019, at the age of 74 just before his test would be fraudulently used to unleash fascism on the world. He was said to have died from pneumonia which was an irony in itself. A few months later he would have had 'Covid-19' on his death certificate. I say the timing of his death was convenient because had he lived Mullis, a brilliant, honest and decent man, would have been

vociferously speaking out against the use of his test to detect 'Covid' when it was never designed, or able, to do that. I know that to be true given that Mullis made the same point when his test was used to 'detect' – not detect – HIV. He had been seriously critical of the Gallo/Montagnier claim to have isolated the HIV 'virus' and shown it to cause AIDS for which Mullis said there was no evidence. AIDS is actually not a disease but a series of diseases from which people die all the time. When they die from those *same diseases* after a positive 'test' for HIV then AIDS goes on their death certificate. I think I've heard that before somewhere. Countries instigated a policy with 'Covid' that anyone who tested positive with a test not testing for the 'virus' and died of any other cause within 28 days and even longer 'Covid-19' had to go on the death certificate. Cases have come from the test that can't test for infectious disease and the deaths are those who have died of *anything* after testing positive with a test not testing for the 'virus'. I'll have much more later about the death certificate scandal.

Mullis was deeply dismissive of the now US 'Covid' star Anthony Fauci who he said was a liar who didn't know anything about anything – 'and I would say that to his face – nothing.' He said of Fauci: 'The man thinks he can take a blood sample, put it in an electron microscope and if it's got a virus in there you'll know it – he doesn't understand electron microscopy and he doesn't understand medicine and shouldn't be in a position like he's in.' That position, terrifyingly, has made him the decider of 'Covid' fascism policy on behalf of the Cult in his role as director since 1984 of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID) while his record of being wrong is laughable; but being wrong, so long as it's the *right kind* of wrong, is why the Cult loves him. He'll say anything the Cult tells him to say. Fauci was made Chief Medical Adviser to the President immediately Biden took office. Biden was installed in the White House by Cult manipulation and one of his first decisions was to elevate Fauci to a position of even more control. This is a coincidence? Yes, and I identify as a flamenco dancer called Lola. How does such an incompetent criminal like Fauci remain in that

pivotal position in American health since *the 1980s*? When you serve the Cult it looks after you until you are surplus to requirements. Kary Mullis said prophetically of Fauci and his like: 'Those guys have an agenda and it's not an agenda we would like them to have … they make their own rules, they change them when they want to, and Tony Fauci does not mind going on television in front of the people who pay his salary and lie directly into the camera.' Fauci has done that almost daily since the 'Covid' hoax began. Lying is in Fauci's DNA. To make the situation crystal clear about the PCR test this is a direct quote from its inventor Kary Mullis:

> It [the PCR test] doesn't tell you that you're sick and doesn't tell you that the thing you ended up with was really going to hurt you ...'

Ask yourself why governments and medical systems the world over have been using this very test to decide who is 'infected' with the SARS-CoV-2 'virus' and the alleged disease it allegedly causes, 'Covid-19'. The answer to that question will tell you what has been going on. By the way, here's a little show-stopper – the 'new' SARS-CoV-2 'virus' was 'identified' as such right from the start using … *the PCR test not testing for the 'virus'*. If you are new to this and find that shocking then stick around. I have hardly started yet. Even worse, other 'tests', like the 'Lateral Flow Device' (LFD), are considered so useless that they have to be *confirmed* by the PCR test! Leaked emails written by Ben Dyson, adviser to UK 'Health' Secretary Matt Hancock, said they were 'dangerously unreliable'. Dyson, executive director of strategy at the Department of Health, wrote: 'As of today, someone who gets a positive LFD result in (say) London has at best a 25 per cent chance of it being a true positive, but if it is a self-reported test potentially as low as 10 per cent (on an optimistic assumption about specificity) or as low as 2 per cent (on a more pessimistic assumption).' These are the 'tests' that schoolchildren and the public are being urged to have twice a week or more and have to isolate if they get a positive. Each fake positive goes in the statistics as a 'case' no matter how ludicrously inaccurate and the

'cases' drive lockdown, masks and the pressure to 'vaccinate'. The government said in response to the email leak that the 'tests' were accurate which confirmed yet again what shocking bloody liars they are. The real false positive rate is *100 percent* as we'll see. In another 'you couldn't make it up' the UK government agreed to pay £2.8 billion to California's Innova Medical Group to supply the irrelevant lateral flow tests. The company's primary test-making centre is in China. Innova Medical Group, established in March, 2020, is owned by Pasaca Capital Inc, chaired by Chinese-American millionaire Charles Huang who was born in Wuhan.

How it works – and how it doesn't

The RT-PCR test, known by its full title of Polymerase chain reaction, is used across the world to make millions, even billions, of copies of a DNA/RNA genetic information sample. The process is called 'amplification' and means that a tiny sample of genetic material is amplified to bring out the detailed content. I stress that it is not testing for an infectious disease. It is simply amplifying a sample of genetic material. In the words of Kary Mullis: 'PCR is … just a process that's used to make a whole lot of something out of something.' To emphasise the point companies that make the PCR tests circulated around the world to 'test' for 'Covid' warn on the box that it can't be used to detect 'Covid' or infectious disease and is for research purposes only. It's okay, rest for a minute and you'll be fine. This is the test that produces the 'cases' and 'deaths' that have been used to destroy human society. All those global and national medical and scientific 'experts' demanding this destruction to 'save us' *KNOW* that the test is not testing for the 'virus' and the cases and deaths they claim to be real are an almost unimaginable fraud. Every one of them and so many others including politicians and psychopaths like Gates and Tedros must be brought before Nuremburg-type trials and jailed for the rest of their lives. The more the genetic sample is amplified by PCR the more elements of that material become sensitive to the test and by that I don't mean sensitive for a 'virus' but for elements of the genetic material which

is *naturally* in the body or relates to remnants of old conditions of various kinds lying dormant and causing no disease. Once the amplification of the PCR reaches a certain level *everyone* will test positive. So much of the material has been made sensitive to the test that everyone will have some part of it in their body. Even lying criminals like Fauci have said that once PCR amplifications pass 35 cycles everything will be a false positive that cannot be trusted for the reasons I have described. I say, like many proper doctors and scientists, that 100 percent of the 'positives' are false, but let's just go with Fauci for a moment.

He says that any amplification over 35 cycles will produce false positives and yet the US Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and Food and Drug Administration (FDA) have recommended up to *40 cycles* and the National Health Service (NHS) in Britain admitted in an internal document for staff that it was using *45 cycles* of amplification. A long list of other countries has been doing the same and at least one 'testing' laboratory has been using *50 cycles*. Have you ever heard a doctor, medical 'expert' or the media ask what level of amplification has been used to claim a 'positive'. The 'test' comes back 'positive' and so you have the 'virus', end of story. Now we can see how the government in Tanzania could send off samples from a goat and a pawpaw fruit under human names and both came back positive for 'Covid-19'. Tanzania president John Magufuli mocked the 'Covid' hysteria, the PCR test and masks and refused to import the DNA-manipulating 'vaccine'. The Cult hated him and an article sponsored by the Bill Gates Foundation appeared in the London *Guardian* in February, 2021, headed 'It's time for Africa to rein in Tanzania's anti-vaxxer president'. Well, 'reined in' he shortly was. Magufuli appeared in good health, but then, in March, 2021, he was dead at 61 from 'heart failure'. He was replaced by Samia Hassan Suhulu who is connected to Klaus Schwab's World Economic Forum and she immediately reversed Magufuli's 'Covid' policy. A sample of cola tested positive for 'Covid' with the PCR test in Germany while American actress and singer-songwriter Erykah Badu tested positive in one nostril and negative in the other. Footballer Ronaldo called

the PCR test 'bullshit' after testing positive three times and being forced to quarantine and miss matches when there was nothing wrong with him. The mantra from Tedros at the World Health Organization and national governments (same thing) has been test, test, test. They know that the more tests they can generate the more fake 'cases' they have which go on to become 'deaths' in ways I am coming to. The UK government has its Operation Moonshot planned to test multiple millions every day in workplaces and schools with free tests for everyone to use twice a week at home in line with the Cult plan from the start to make testing part of life. A government advertisement for an 'Interim Head of Asymptomatic Testing Communication' said the job included responsibility for delivering a 'communications strategy' (propaganda) 'to support the expansion of asymptomatic testing that *'normalises testing as part of everyday life*'. More tests means more fake 'cases', 'deaths' and fascism. I have heard of, and from, many people who booked a test, couldn't turn up, and yet got a positive result through the post for a test they'd never even had. The whole thing is crazy, but for the Cult there's method in the madness. Controlling and manipulating the level of amplification of the test means the authorities can control whenever they want the number of apparent 'cases' and 'deaths'. If they want to justify more fascist lockdown and destruction of livelihoods they keep the amplification high. If they want to give the illusion that lockdowns and the 'vaccine' are working then they lower the amplification and 'cases' and 'deaths' will appear to fall. In January, 2021, the Cult-owned World Health Organization suddenly warned laboratories about over-amplification of the test and to lower the threshold. Suddenly headlines began appearing such as: 'Why ARE "Covid" cases plummeting?' This was just when the vaccine rollout was underway and I had predicted months before they would make cases appear to fall through amplification tampering when the 'vaccine' came. These people are so predictable.

Cow vaccines?

The question must be asked of what is on the test swabs being poked far up the nose of the population to the base of the brain? A nasal swab punctured one woman's brain and caused it to leak fluid. Most of these procedures are being done by people with little training or medical knowledge. Dr Lorraine Day, former orthopaedic trauma surgeon and Chief of Orthopaedic Surgery at San Francisco General Hospital, says the tests are really a *'vaccine'*. Cows have long been vaccinated this way. She points out that masks have to cover the nose and the mouth where it is claimed the 'virus' exists in saliva. Why then don't they take saliva from the mouth as they do with a DNA test instead of pushing a long swab up the nose towards the brain? The ethmoid bone separates the nasal cavity from the brain and within that bone is the cribriform plate. Dr Day says that when the swab is pushed up against this plate and twisted the procedure is 'depositing things back there'. She claims that among these 'things' are nanoparticles that can enter the brain. Researchers have noted that a team at the Gates-funded Johns Hopkins have designed tiny, star-shaped micro-devices that can latch onto intestinal mucosa and release drugs into the body. Mucosa is the thin skin that covers the inside surface of parts of the body such as *the nose* and mouth and produces mucus to protect them. The Johns Hopkins micro-devices are called 'theragrippers' and were 'inspired' by a parasitic worm that digs its sharp teeth into a host's intestines. Nasal swabs are also coated in the sterilisation agent ethylene oxide. The US National Cancer Institute posts this explanation on its website:

> At room temperature, ethylene oxide is a flammable colorless gas with a sweet odor. It is used primarily to produce other chemicals, including antifreeze. In smaller amounts, ethylene oxide is used as a pesticide and a sterilizing agent. The ability of ethylene oxide to damage DNA makes it an effective sterilizing agent but also accounts for its cancer-causing activity.

The Institute mentions lymphoma and leukaemia as cancers most frequently reported to be associated with occupational exposure to ethylene oxide along with stomach and breast cancers. How does anyone think this is going to work out with the constant testing

regime being inflicted on adults and children at home and at school that will accumulate in the body anything that's on the swab?

Doctors know best

It is vital for people to realise that 'hero' doctors 'know' only what the Big Pharma-dominated medical authorities tell them to 'know' and if they refuse to 'know' what they are told to 'know' they are out the door. They are mostly not physicians or healers, but repeaters of the official narrative – or else. I have seen alleged professional doctors on British television make shocking statements that we are supposed to take seriously. One called 'Dr' Amir Khan, who is actually telling patients how to respond to illness, said that men could take the birth pill to 'help slow down the effects of Covid-19'. In March, 2021, another ridiculous 'Covid study' by an American doctor proposed injecting men with the female sex hormone progesterone as a 'Covid' treatment. British doctor Nighat Arif told the BBC that face coverings were now going to be part of ongoing normal. Yes, the vaccine protects you, she said (evidence?) … but the way to deal with viruses in the community was always going to come down to hand washing, face covering and keeping a physical distance. That's not what we were told before the 'vaccine' was circulating. Arif said she couldn't imagine ever again going on the underground or in a lift without a mask. I was just thanking my good luck that she was not my doctor when she said – in March, 2021 – that if 'we are *behaving* and we are doing all the right things' she thought we could 'have our nearest and dearest around us at home … around *Christmas* and N*ew Year!* Her patronising delivery was the usual school teacher talking to six-year-olds as she repeated every government talking point and probably believed them all. If we have learned anything from the 'Covid' experience surely it must be that humanity's perception of doctors needs a fundamental rethink. NHS 'doctor' Sara Kayat told her television audience that the 'Covid vaccine' would '100 percent prevent hospitalisation and death'. Not even Big Pharma claimed that. We have to stop taking 'experts' at their word without question when so many of them are

clueless and only repeating the party line on which their careers depend. That is not to say there are not brilliants doctors – there are and I have spoken to many of them since all this began – but you won't see them in the mainstream media or quoted by the psychopaths and yes-people in government.

Remember the name – Christian Drosten

German virologist Christian Drosten, Director of Charité Institute of Virology in Berlin, became a national star after the pandemic hoax began. He was feted on television and advised the German government on 'Covid' policy. Most importantly to the wider world Drosten led a group that produced the 'Covid' testing protocol for the PCR test. What a remarkable feat given the PCR cannot test for infectious disease and even more so when you think that Drosten said that his method of testing for SARS-CoV-2 was developed 'without having virus material available'. *He developed a test for a 'virus' that he didn't have and had never seen*. Let that sink in as you survey the global devastation that came from what he did. The whole catastrophe of Drosten's 'test' was based on the alleged genetic sequence published by Chinese scientists on the Internet. We will see in the next chapter that this alleged 'genetic sequence' has never been produced by China or anyone and cannot be when there *is no* SARS-CoV-2. Drosten, however, doesn't seem to let little details like that get in the way. He was the lead author with Victor Corman from the same Charité Hospital of the paper 'Detection of 2019 novel coronavirus (2019-nCoV) by real-time PCR' published in a magazine called *Eurosurveillance*. This became known as the Corman-Drosten paper. In November, 2020, with human society devastated by the effects of the Corman-Drosten test baloney, the protocol was publicly challenged by 22 international scientists and independent researchers from Europe, the United States, and Japan. Among them were senior molecular geneticists, biochemists, immunologists, and microbiologists. They produced a document headed 'External peer review of the RTPCR test to detect SARS-Cov-2 Reveals 10 Major Flaws At The Molecular and Methodological Level: Consequences

For False-Positive Results'. The flaws in the Corman-Drosten test included the following:

- The test is non-specific because of erroneous design
- Results are enormously variable
- The test is unable to discriminate between the whole 'virus' and viral fragments
- It doesn't have positive or negative controls
- The test lacks a standard operating procedure
- It is unsupported by proper peer view

The scientists said the PCR 'Covid' testing protocol was not founded on science and they demanded the Corman-Drosten paper be retracted by *Eurosurveillance*. They said all present and previous Covid deaths, cases, and 'infection rates' should be subject to a massive retroactive inquiry. Lockdowns and travel restrictions should be reviewed and relaxed and those diagnosed through PCR to have 'Covid-19' should not be forced to isolate. Dr Kevin Corbett, a health researcher and nurse educator with a long academic career producing a stream of peer-reviewed publications at many UK universities, made the same point about the PCR test debacle. He said of the scientists' conclusions: 'Every scientific rationale for the development of that test has been totally destroyed by this paper. It's like Hiroshima/Nagasaki to the Covid test.' He said that China hadn't given them an isolated 'virus' when Drosten developed the test. Instead they had developed the test from *a sequence in a gene bank*.' Put another way … *they made it up*! The scientists were supported in this contention by a Portuguese appeals court which ruled in November, 2020, that PCR tests are unreliable and it is unlawful to quarantine people based solely on a PCR test. The point about China not providing an isolated virus must be true when the 'virus' has never been isolated to this day and the consequences of that will become clear. Drosten and company produced this useless 'protocol' right on cue in January, 2020, just as the 'virus' was said to

be moving westward and it somehow managed to successfully pass a peer-review in 24 hours. In other words there was no peer-review for a test that would be used to decide who had 'Covid' and who didn't across the world. The Cult-created, Gates-controlled World Health Organization immediately recommended all its nearly 200 member countries to use the Drosten PCR protocol to detect 'cases' and 'deaths'. The sting was underway and it continues to this day.

So who is this Christian Drosten that produced the means through which death, destruction and economic catastrophe would be justified? His education background, including his doctoral thesis, would appear to be somewhat shrouded in mystery and his track record is dire as with another essential player in the 'Covid' hoax, the Gates-funded Professor Neil Ferguson at the Gates-funded Imperial College in London of whom more shortly. Drosten predicted in 2003 that the alleged original SARS 'virus' (SARS-1') was an epidemic that could have serious effects on economies and an effective vaccine would take at least two years to produce. Drosten's answer to every alleged 'outbreak' is a vaccine which you won't be shocked to know. What followed were just 774 official deaths worldwide and none in Germany where there were only nine cases. That is even if you believe there ever was a SARS 'virus' when the evidence is zilch and I will expand on this in the next chapter. Drosten claims to be co-discoverer of 'SARS-1' and developed a test for it in 2003. He was screaming warnings about 'swine flu' in 2009 and how it was a widespread infection far more severe than any dangers from a vaccine could be and people should get vaccinated. It would be helpful for Drosten's vocal chords if he simply recorded the words 'the virus is deadly and you need to get vaccinated' and copies could be handed out whenever the latest made-up threat comes along. Drosten's swine flu epidemic never happened, but Big Pharma didn't mind with governments spending hundreds of millions on vaccines that hardly anyone bothered to use and many who did wished they hadn't. A study in 2010 revealed that the risk of dying from swine flu, or H1N1, was no higher than that of the annual seasonal flu which is what at least most of 'it' really was as in

the case of 'Covid-19'. A media investigation into Drosten asked how with such a record of inaccuracy he could be *the* government adviser on these issues. The answer to that question is the same with Drosten, Ferguson and Fauci – they keep on giving the authorities the 'conclusions' and 'advice' they want to hear. Drosten certainly produced the goods for them in January, 2020, with his PCR protocol garbage and provided the foundation of what German internal medicine specialist Dr Claus Köhnlein, co-author of *Virus Mania*, called the 'test pandemic'. The 22 scientists in the *Eurosurveillance* challenge called out conflicts of interest within the Drosten 'protocol' group and with good reason. Olfert Landt, a regular co-author of Drosten 'studies', owns the biotech company TIB Molbiol Syntheselabor GmbH in Berlin which manufactures and sells the tests that Drosten and his mates come up with. They have done this with SARS, Enterotoxigenic E. coli (ETEC), MERS, Zika 'virus', yellow fever, and now 'Covid'. Landt told the *Berliner Zeitung* newspaper:

> The testing, design and development came from the Charité [Drosten and Corman]. We simply implemented it immediately in the form of a kit. And if we don't have the virus, which originally only existed in Wuhan, we can make a synthetic gene to simulate the genome of the virus. That's what we did very quickly.

This is more confirmation that the Drosten test was designed without access to the 'virus' and only a synthetic simulation which is what SARS-CoV-2 really is – a computer-generated synthetic fiction. It's quite an enterprise they have going here. A Drosten team decides what the test for something should be and Landt's biotech company flogs it to governments and medical systems across the world. His company must have made an absolute fortune since the 'Covid' hoax began. Dr Reiner Fuellmich, a prominent German consumer protection trial lawyer in Germany and California, is on Drosten's case and that of Tedros at the World Health Organization for crimes against humanity with a class-action lawsuit being prepared in the United States and other legal action in Germany.

Why China?

Scamming the world with a 'virus' that doesn't exist would seem impossible on the face of it, but not if you have control of the relatively few people that make policy decisions and the great majority of the global media. Remember it's not about changing 'real' reality it's about controlling *perception* of reality. You don't have to make something happen you only have make people *believe* that it's happening. Renegade Minds understand this and are therefore much harder to swindle. 'Covid-19' is not a 'real' 'virus'. It's a mind virus, like a computer virus, which has infected the minds, not the bodies, of billions. It all started, publically at least, in China and that alone is of central significance. The Cult was behind the revolution led by its asset Mao Zedong, or Chairman Mao, which established the People's Republic of China on October 1st, 1949. It should have been called The Cult's Republic of China, but the name had to reflect the recurring illusion that vicious dictatorships are run by and for the people (see all the 'Democratic Republics' controlled by tyrants). In the same way we have the 'Biden' Democratic Republic of America officially ruled by a puppet tyrant (at least temporarily) on behalf of Cult tyrants. The creation of Mao's merciless communist/fascist dictatorship was part of a frenzy of activity by the Cult at the conclusion of World War Two which, like the First World War, it had instigated through its assets in Germany, Britain, France, the United States and elsewhere. Israel was formed in 1948; the Soviet Union expanded its 'Iron Curtain' control, influence and military power with the Warsaw Pact communist alliance in 1955; the United Nations was formed in 1945 as a Cult precursor to world government; and a long list of world bodies would be established including the World Health Organization (1948), World Trade Organization (1948 under another name until 1995), International Monetary Fund (1945) and World Bank (1944). Human society was redrawn and hugely centralised in the global Problem-Reaction-Solution that was World War Two. All these changes were significant. Israel would become the headquarters of the Sabbatians

and the revolution in China would prepare the ground and control system for the events of 2019/2020.

Renegade Minds know there are no borders except for public consumption. The Cult is a seamless, borderless global entity and to understand the game we need to put aside labels like borders, nations, countries, communism, fascism and democracy. These delude the population into believing that countries are ruled within their borders by a government of whatever shade when these are mere agencies of a global power. America's illusion of democracy and China's communism/fascism are subsidiaries – vehicles – for the same agenda. We may hear about conflict and competition between America and China and on the lower levels that will be true; but at the Cult level they are branches of the same company in the way of the McDonald's example I gave earlier. I have tracked in the books over the years support by US governments of both parties for Chinese Communist Party infiltration of American society through allowing the sale of land, even military facilities, and the acquisition of American business and university influence. All this is underpinned by the infamous stealing of intellectual property and technological know-how. Cult-owned Silicon Valley corporations waive their fraudulent 'morality' to do business with human-rights-free China; Cult-controlled Disney has become China's PR department; and China in effect owns 'American' sports such as basketball which depends for much of its income on Chinese audiences. As a result any sports player, coach or official speaking out against China's horrific human rights record is immediately condemned or fired by the China-worshipping National Basketball Association. One of the first acts of China-controlled Biden was to issue an executive order telling federal agencies to stop making references to the 'virus' by the 'geographic location of its origin'. Long-time Congressman Jerry Nadler warned that criticising China, America's biggest rival, leads to hate crimes against Asian people in the United States. So shut up you bigot. China is fast closing in on Israel as a country that must not be criticised which is apt, really, given that Sabbatians control them both. The two countries have

developed close economic, military, technological and strategic ties which include involvement in China's 'Silk Road' transport and economic initiative to connect China with Europe. Israel was the first country in the Middle East to recognise the establishment of Mao's tyranny in 1950 months after it was established.

Project Wuhan – the 'Covid' Psyop

I emphasise again that the Cult plays the long game and what is happening to the world today is the result of centuries of calculated manipulation following a script to take control step-by-step of every aspect of human society. I will discuss later the common force behind all this that has spanned those centuries and thousands of years if the truth be told. Instigating the Mao revolution in China in 1949 with a 2020 'pandemic' in mind is not only how they work – the 71 years between them is really quite short by the Cult's standards of manipulation preparation. The reason for the Cult's Chinese revolution was to create a fiercely-controlled environment within which an extreme structure for human control could be incubated to eventually be unleashed across the world. We have seen this happen since the 'pandemic' emerged from China with the Chinese control-structure founded on AI technology and tyrannical enforcement sweep across the West. Until the moment when the Cult went for broke in the West and put its fascism on public display Western governments had to pay some lip-service to freedom and democracy to not alert too many people to the tyranny-in-the-making. Freedoms were more subtly eroded and power centralised with covert government structures put in place waiting for the arrival of 2020 when that smokescreen of 'freedom' could be dispensed with. The West was not able to move towards tyranny before 2020 anything like as fast as China which was created as a tyranny and had no limits on how fast it could construct the Cult's blueprint for global control. When the time came to impose that structure on the world it was the same Cult-owned Chinese communist/fascist government that provided the excuse – the 'Covid pandemic'. It was absolutely crucial to the Cult plan for the Chinese response to the 'pandemic' –

draconian lockdowns of the entire population – to become the blueprint that Western countries would follow to destroy the livelihoods and freedom of their people. This is why the Cult-owned, Gates-owned, WHO Director-General Tedros said early on:

The Chinese government is to be congratulated for the extraordinary measures it has taken to contain the outbreak. China is actually setting a new standard for outbreak response and it is not an exaggeration.

Forbes magazine said of China: '… those measures protected untold millions from getting the disease'. The Rockefeller Foundation 'epidemic scenario' document in 2010 said 'prophetically':

However, a few countries did fare better – China in particular. The Chinese government's quick imposition and enforcement of mandatory quarantine for all citizens, as well as its instant and near-hermetic sealing off of all borders, saved millions of lives, stopping the spread of the virus far earlier than in other countries and enabling a swifter post-pandemic recovery.

Once again – *spooky*.

The first official story was the 'bat theory' or rather the bat diversion. The source of the 'virus outbreak' we were told was a ''wet market' in Wuhan where bats and other animals are bought and eaten in horrifically unhygienic conditions. Then another story emerged through the alternative media that the 'virus' had been released on purpose or by accident from a BSL-4 (biosafety level 4) laboratory in Wuhan not far from the wet market. The lab was reported to create and work with lethal concoctions and bioweapons. Biosafety level 4 is the highest in the World Health Organization system of safety and containment. Renegade Minds are aware of what I call designer manipulation. The ideal for the Cult is for people to buy its prime narrative which in the opening salvoes of the 'pandemic' was the wet market story. It knows, however, that there is now a considerable worldwide alternative media of researchers sceptical of anything governments say and they are often given a version of events in a form they can perceive as credible while misdirecting them from the real truth. In this case let them

think that the conspiracy involved is a 'bioweapon virus' released from the Wuhan lab to keep them from the real conspiracy – *there is no 'virus'*. The WHO's current position on the source of the outbreak at the time of writing appears to be: 'We haven't got a clue, mate.' This is a good position to maintain mystery and bewilderment. The inner circle will know where the 'virus' came from – *nowhere*. The bottom line was to ensure the public believed there *was* a 'virus' and it didn't much matter if they thought it was natural or had been released from a lab. The belief that there was a 'deadly virus' was all that was needed to trigger global panic and fear. The population was terrified into handing their power to authority and doing what they were told. They had to or they were 'all gonna die'.

In March, 2020, information began to come my way from real doctors and scientists and my own additional research which had my intuition screaming: 'Yes, that's it! *There is no virus*.' The 'bioweapon' was not the 'virus'; it was the *'vaccine'* already being talked about that would be the bioweapon. My conclusion was further enhanced by happenings in Wuhan. The 'virus' was said to be sweeping the city and news footage circulated of people collapsing in the street (which they've never done in the West with the same 'virus'). The Chinese government was building 'new hospitals' in a matter of ten days to 'cope with demand' such was the virulent nature of the 'virus'. Yet in what seemed like no time the 'new hospitals' closed – even if they even opened – and China declared itself 'virus-free'. It was back to business as usual. This was more propaganda to promote the Chinese draconian lockdowns in the West as the way to 'beat the virus'. Trouble was that we subsequently had lockdown after lockdown, but never business as usual. As the people of the West and most of the rest of the world were caught in an ever-worsening spiral of lockdown, social distancing, masks, isolated old people, families forced apart, and livelihood destruction, it was party-time in Wuhan. Pictures emerged of thousands of people enjoying pool parties and concerts. It made no sense until you realised there never was a 'virus' and the

whole thing was a Cult set-up to transform human society out of one its major global strongholds – China.

How is it possible to deceive virtually the entire world population into believing there is a deadly virus when there is not even a 'virus' let alone a deadly one? It's nothing like as difficult as you would think and that's clearly true because it happened.

Postscript: See end of book Postscript for more on the 'Wuhan lab virus release' story which the authorities and media were pushing heavily in the summer of 2021 to divert attention from the truth that the 'Covid virus' is pure invention.

CHAPTER FIVE

There *is no* 'virus'

You can fool some of the people all of the time, and all of the people some of the time, but you cannot fool all of the people all of the time
Abraham Lincoln

The greatest form of mind control is repetition. The more you repeat the same mantra of alleged 'facts' the more will accept them to be true. It becomes an 'everyone knows that, mate'. If you can also censor any other version or alternative to your alleged 'facts' you are pretty much home and cooking.

By the start of 2020 the Cult owned the global mainstream media almost in its entirety to spew out its 'Covid' propaganda and ignore or discredit any other information and view. Cult-owned social media platforms in Cult-owned Silicon Valley were poised and ready to unleash a campaign of ferocious censorship to obliterate all but the official narrative. To complete the circle many demands for censorship by Silicon Valley were led by the mainstream media as 'journalists' became full-out enforcers for the Cult both as propagandists and censors. Part of this has been the influx of young people straight out of university who have become 'journalists' in significant positions. They have no experience and a headful of programmed perceptions from their years at school and university at a time when today's young are the most perceptually-targeted generations in known human history given the insidious impact of technology. They enter the media perceptually prepared and ready to repeat the narratives of the system that programmed them to

repeat its narratives. The BBC has a truly pathetic 'specialist disinformation reporter' called Marianna Spring who fits this bill perfectly. She is clueless about the world, how it works and what is really going on. Her role is to discredit anyone doing the job that a proper journalist would do and system-serving hacks like Spring wouldn't dare to do or even see the need to do. They are too busy licking the arse of authority which can never be wrong and, in the case of the BBC propaganda programme, *Panorama*, contacting payments systems such as PayPal to have a donations page taken down for a film company making documentaries questioning vaccines. Even the BBC soap opera *EastEnders* included a disgracefully biased scene in which an inarticulate white working class woman was made to look foolish for questioning the 'vaccine' while a well-spoken black man and Asian woman promoted the government narrative. It ticked every BBC box and the fact that the black and minority community was resisting the 'vaccine' had nothing to do with the way the scene was written. The BBC has become a disgusting tyrannical propaganda and censorship operation that should be defunded and disbanded and a free media take its place with a brief to stop censorship instead of demanding it. A BBC 'interview' with Gates goes something like: 'Mr Gates, sir, if I can call you sir, would you like to tell our audience why you are such a great man, a wonderful humanitarian philanthropist, and why you should absolutely be allowed as a software salesman to decide health policy for approaching eight billion people? Thank you, sir, please sir.' Propaganda programming has been incessant and merciless and when all you hear is the same story from the media, repeated by those around you who have only heard the same story, is it any wonder that people on a grand scale believe absolute mendacious garbage to be true? You are about to see, too, why this level of information control is necessary when the official 'Covid' narrative is so nonsensical and unsupportable by the evidence.

Structure of Deceit

The pyramid structure through which the 'Covid' hoax has been manifested is very simple and has to be to work. As few people as possible have to be involved with full knowledge of what they are doing – and why – or the real story would get out. At the top of the pyramid are the inner core of the Cult which controls Bill Gates who, in turn, controls the World Health Organization through his pivotal funding and his puppet Director-General mouthpiece, Tedros. Before he was appointed Tedros was chair of the Gates-founded Global Fund to 'fight against AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria', a board member of the Gates-funded 'vaccine alliance' GAVI, and on the board of another Gates-funded organisation. Gates owns him and picked him for a specific reason – Tedros is a crook and worse. 'Dr' Tedros (he's not a medical doctor, the first WHO chief not to be) was a member of the tyrannical Marxist government of Ethiopia for decades with all its human rights abuses. He has faced allegations of corruption and misappropriation of funds and was exposed three times for covering up cholera epidemics while Ethiopia's health minister. Tedros appointed the mass-murdering genocidal Zimbabwe dictator Robert Mugabe as a WHO goodwill ambassador for public health which, as with Tedros, is like appointing a psychopath to run a peace and love campaign. The move was so ridiculous that he had to drop Mugabe in the face of widespread condemnation. American economist David Steinman, a Nobel peace prize nominee, lodged a complaint with the International Criminal Court in The Hague over alleged genocide by Tedros when he was Ethiopia's foreign minister. Steinman says Tedros was a 'crucial decision maker' who directed the actions of Ethiopia's security forces from 2013 to 2015 and one of three officials in charge when those security services embarked on the 'killing' and 'torturing' of Ethiopians. You can see where Tedros is coming from and it's sobering to think that he has been the vehicle for Gates and the Cult to direct the global response to 'Covid'. Think about that. A psychopathic Cult dictates to psychopath Gates who dictates to psychopath Tedros who dictates how countries of the world must respond to a 'Covid virus' never scientifically shown to exist. At the same time psychopathic Cult-owned Silicon Valley information

giants like Google, YouTube, Facebook and Twitter announced very early on that they would give the Cult/Gates/Tedros/WHO version of the narrative free advertising and censor those who challenged their intelligence-insulting, mendacious story.

The next layer in the global 'medical' structure below the Cult, Gates and Tedros are the chief medical officers and science 'advisers' in each of the WHO member countries which means virtually all of them. Medical officers and arbiters of science (they're not) then take the WHO policy and recommended responses and impose them on their country's population while the political 'leaders' say they are deciding policy (they're clearly not) by 'following the science' on the advice of the 'experts' – the same medical officers and science 'advisers' (dictators). In this way with the rarest of exceptions the entire world followed the same policy of lockdown, people distancing, masks and 'vaccines' dictated by the psychopathic Cult, psychopathic Gates and psychopathic Tedros who we are supposed to believe give a damn about the health of the world population they are seeking to enslave. That, amazingly, is all there is to it in terms of crucial decision-making. Medical staff in each country then follow like sheep the dictates of the shepherds at the top of the national medical hierarchies – chief medical officers and science 'advisers' who themselves follow like sheep the shepherds of the World Health Organization and the Cult. Shepherds at the national level often have major funding and other connections to Gates and his Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation which carefully hands out money like confetti at a wedding to control the entire global medical system from the WHO down.

Follow the money

Christopher Whitty, Chief Medical Adviser to the UK Government at the centre of 'virus' policy, a senior adviser to the government's Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE), and Executive Board member of the World Health Organization, was gifted a grant of $40 million by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation for malaria research in Africa. The BBC described the unelected Whitty as 'the

official who will probably have the greatest impact on our everyday lives of any individual policymaker in modern times' and so it turned out. What Gates and Tedros have said Whitty has done like his equivalents around the world. Patrick Vallance, co-chair of SAGE and the government's Chief Scientific Adviser, is a former executive of Big Pharma giant GlaxoSmithKline with its fundamental financial and business connections to Bill Gates. In September, 2020, it was revealed that Vallance owned a deferred bonus of shares in GlaxoSmithKline worth £600,000 while the company was 'developing' a 'Covid vaccine'. Move along now – nothing to see here – what could possibly be wrong with that? Imperial College in London, a major player in 'Covid' policy in Britain and elsewhere with its 'Covid-19' Response Team, is funded by Gates and has big connections to China while the now infamous Professor Neil Ferguson, the useless 'computer modeller' at Imperial College is also funded by Gates. Ferguson delivered the dramatically inaccurate excuse for the first lockdowns (much more in the next chapter). The Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation (IHME) in the United States, another source of outrageously false 'Covid' computer models to justify lockdowns, is bankrolled by Gates who is a vehement promotor of lockdowns. America's version of Whitty and Vallance, the again now infamous Anthony Fauci, has connections to 'Covid vaccine' maker Moderna as does Bill Gates through funding from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. Fauci is director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID), a major recipient of Gates money, and they are very close. Deborah Birx who was appointed White House Coronavirus Response Coordinator in February, 2020, is yet another with ties to Gates. Everywhere you look at the different elements around the world behind the coordination and decision making of the 'Covid' hoax there is Bill Gates and his money. They include the World Health Organization; Centers for Disease Control (CDC) in the United States; National Institutes of Health (NIH) of Anthony Fauci; Imperial College and Neil Ferguson; the London School of Hygiene where Chris Whitty worked; Regulatory agencies like the UK Medicines & Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA)

which gave emergency approval for 'Covid vaccines'; Wellcome Trust; GAVI, the Vaccine Alliance; the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations (CEPI); Johns Hopkins University which has compiled the false 'Covid' figures; and the World Economic Forum. A Nationalfile.com article said:

> Gates has a lot of pull in the medical world, he has a multi-million dollar relationship with Dr. Fauci, and Fauci originally took the Gates line supporting vaccines and casting doubt on [the drug hydroxychloroquine]. Coronavirus response team member Dr. Deborah Birx, appointed by former president Obama to serve as United States Global AIDS Coordinator, also sits on the board of a group that has received billions from Gates' foundation, and Birx reportedly used a disputed Bill Gates-funded model for the White House's Coronavirus effort. Gates is a big proponent for a population lockdown scenario for the Coronavirus outbreak.

Another funder of Moderna is the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA), the technology-development arm of the Pentagon and one of the most sinister organisations on earth. DARPA had a major role with the CIA covert technology-funding operation In-Q-Tel in the development of Google and social media which is now at the centre of global censorship. Fauci and Gates are extremely close and openly admit to talking regularly about 'Covid' policy, but then why wouldn't Gates have a seat at every national 'Covid' table after his Foundation committed $1.75 billion to the 'fight against Covid-19'. When passed through our Orwellian Translation Unit this means that he has bought and paid for the Cult-driven 'Covid' response worldwide. Research the major 'Covid' response personnel in your own country and you will find the same Gates funding and other connections again and again. Medical and science chiefs following World Health Organization 'policy' sit atop a medical hierarchy in their country of administrators, doctors and nursing staff. These 'subordinates' are told they must work and behave in accordance with the policy delivered from the 'top' of the national 'health' pyramid which is largely the policy delivered by the WHO which is the policy delivered by Gates and the Cult. The whole 'Covid' narrative has been imposed on medical staff by a climate of fear although great numbers don't even need that to comply. They do so through breathtaking levels of ignorance and

include doctors who go through life simply repeating what Big Pharma and their hierarchical masters tell them to say and believe. No wonder Big Pharma 'medicine' is one of the biggest killers on Planet Earth.

The same top-down system of intimidation operates with regard to the Cult Big Pharma cartel which also dictates policy through national and global medical systems in this way. The Cult and Big Pharma agendas are the same because the former controls and owns the latter. 'Health' administrators, doctors, and nursing staff are told to support and parrot the dictated policy or they will face consequences which can include being fired. How sad it's been to see medical staff meekly repeating and imposing Cult policy without question and most of those who can see through the deceit are only willing to speak anonymously off the record. They know what will happen if their identity is known. This has left the courageous few to expose the lies about the 'virus', face masks, overwhelmed hospitals that aren't, and the dangers of the 'vaccine' that isn't a vaccine. When these medical professionals and scientists, some renowned in their field, have taken to the Internet to expose the truth their articles, comments and videos have been deleted by Cult-owned Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. What a real head-shaker to see YouTube videos with leading world scientists and highly qualified medical specialists with an added link underneath to the notorious Cult propaganda website *Wikipedia* to find the 'facts' about the same subject.

HIV – the 'Covid' trial-run

I'll give you an example of the consequences for health and truth that come from censorship and unquestioning belief in official narratives. The story was told by PCR inventor Kary Mullis in his book *Dancing Naked in the Mind Field*. He said that in 1984 he accepted as just another scientific fact that Luc Montagnier of France's Pasteur Institute and Robert Gallo of America's National Institutes of Health had independently discovered that a 'retrovirus' dubbed HIV (human immunodeficiency virus) caused AIDS. They

were, after all, Mullis writes, specialists in retroviruses. This is how the medical and science pyramids work. Something is announced or *assumed* and then becomes an everybody-knows-that purely through repetition of the assumption as if it is fact. Complete crap becomes accepted truth with no supporting evidence and only repetition of the crap. This is how a 'virus' that doesn't exist became the 'virus' that changed the world. The HIV-AIDS fairy story became a multi-billion pound industry and the media poured out propaganda terrifying the world about the deadly HIV 'virus' that caused the lethal AIDS. By then Mullis was working at a lab in Santa Monica, California, to detect retroviruses with his PCR test in blood donations received by the Red Cross. In doing so he asked a virologist where he could find a reference for HIV being the cause of AIDS. 'You don't need a reference,' the virologist said … *'Everybody knows it.'* Mullis said he wanted to quote a reference in the report he was doing and he said he felt a little funny about not knowing the source of such an important discovery when everyone else seemed to. The virologist suggested he cite a report by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) on morbidity and mortality. Mullis read the report, but it only said that an organism had been identified and did not say how. The report did not identify the original scientific work. Physicians, however, *assumed* (key recurring theme) that if the CDC was convinced that HIV caused AIDS then proof must exist. Mullis continues:

I did computer searches. Neither Montagnier, Gallo, nor anyone else had published papers describing experiments which led to the conclusion that HIV probably caused AIDS. I read the papers in Science for which they had become well known as AIDS doctors, but all they had said there was that they had found evidence of a past infection by something which was probably HIV in some AIDS patients.

They found antibodies. Antibodies to viruses had always been considered evidence of past disease, not present disease. Antibodies signaled that the virus had been defeated. The patient had saved himself. There was no indication in these papers that this virus caused a disease. They didn't show that everybody with the antibodies had the disease. In fact they found some healthy people with antibodies.

Mullis asked why their work had been published if Montagnier and Gallo hadn't really found this evidence, and why had they been fighting so hard to get credit for the discovery? He says he was hesitant to write 'HIV is the probable cause of AIDS' until he found published evidence to support that. 'Tens of thousands of scientists and researchers were spending billions of dollars a year doing research based on this idea,' Mullis writes. 'The reason had to be there somewhere; otherwise these people would not have allowed their research to settle into one narrow channel of investigation.' He said he lectured about PCR at numerous meetings where people were always talking about HIV and he asked them how they knew that HIV was the cause of AIDS:

> Everyone said something. Everyone had the answer at home, in the office, in some drawer. They all knew, and they would send me the papers as soon as they got back. But I never got any papers. Nobody ever sent me the news about how AIDS was caused by HIV.

Eventually Mullis was able to ask Montagnier himself about the reference proof when he lectured in San Diego at the grand opening of the University of California AIDS Research Center. Mullis says this was the last time he would ask his question without showing anger. Montagnier said he should reference the CDC report. 'I read it', Mullis said, and it didn't answer the question. 'If Montagnier didn't know the answer who the hell did?' Then one night Mullis was driving when an interview came on National Public Radio with Peter Duesberg, a prominent virologist at Berkeley and a California Scientist of the Year. Mullis says he finally understood why he could not find references that connected HIV to AIDS – *there weren't any!* No one had ever proved that HIV causes AIDS even though it had spawned a multi-billion pound global industry and the media was repeating this as fact every day in their articles and broadcasts terrifying the shit out of people about AIDS and giving the impression that a positive test for HIV (see 'Covid') was a death sentence. Duesberg was a threat to the AIDS gravy train and the agenda that underpinned it. He was therefore abused and castigated after he told the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences

there was no good evidence implicating the new 'virus'. Editors rejected his manuscripts and his research funds were deleted. Mullis points out that the CDC has defined AIDS as one of more than 30 diseases *if accompanied* by a positive result on a test that detects antibodies to HIV; but those same diseases are not defined as AIDS cases when antibodies are not detected:

> If an HIV-positive woman develops uterine cancer, for example, she is considered to have AIDS. If she is not HIV positive, she simply has uterine cancer. An HIV-positive man with tuberculosis has AIDS; if he tests negative he simply has tuberculosis. If he lives in Kenya or Colombia, where the test for HIV antibodies is too expensive, he is simply presumed to have the antibodies and therefore AIDS, and therefore he can be treated in the World Health Organization's clinic. It's the only medical help available in some places. And it's free, because the countries that support WHO are worried about AIDS.

Mullis accuses the CDC of continually adding new diseases (see ever more 'Covid symptoms') to the grand AIDS definition and of virtually doctoring the books to make it appear as if the disease continued to spread. He cites how in 1993 the CDC enormously broadened its AIDS definition and county health authorities were delighted because they received $2,500 per year from the Federal government for every reported AIDS case. Ladies and gentlemen, I have just described, via Kary Mullis, the 'Covid pandemic' of 2020 and beyond. Every element is the same and it's been pulled off in the same way by the same networks.

The 'Covid virus' exists? Okay – prove it. Er … still waiting

What Kary Mullis described with regard to 'HIV' has been repeated with 'Covid'. A claim is made that a new, or 'novel', infection has been found and the entire medical system of the world repeats that as fact exactly as they did with HIV and AIDS. No one in the mainstream asks rather relevant questions such as 'How do you know?' and 'Where is your proof?' The SARS-Cov-2 'virus' and the 'Covid-19 disease' became an overnight 'everybody-knows-that'. The origin could be debated and mulled over, but what you could not suggest was that 'SARS-Cov-2' didn't exist. That would be

ridiculous. 'Everybody knows' the 'virus' exists. Well, I didn't for one along with American proper doctors like Andrew Kaufman and Tom Cowan and long-time American proper journalist Jon Rappaport. We dared to pursue the obvious and simple question: 'Where's the evidence?' The overwhelming majority in medicine, journalism and the general public did not think to ask that. After all, *everyone knew* there was a new 'virus'. Everyone was saying so and I heard it on the BBC. Some would eventually argue that the 'deadly virus' was nothing like as deadly as claimed, but few would venture into the realms of its very existence. Had they done so they would have found that the evidence for that claim had gone AWOL as with HIV causes AIDS. In fact, not even that. For something to go AWOL it has to exist in the first place and scientific proof for a 'SARS-Cov-2' can be filed under nothing, nowhere and zilch.

Dr Andrew Kaufman is a board-certified forensic psychiatrist in New York State, a Doctor of Medicine and former Assistant Professor and Medical Director of Psychiatry at SUNY Upstate Medical University, and Medical Instructor of Hematology and Oncology at the Medical School of South Carolina. He also studied biology at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and trained in Psychiatry at Duke University. Kaufman is retired from allopathic medicine, but remains a consultant and educator on natural healing, I saw a video of his very early on in the 'Covid' hoax in which he questioned claims about the 'virus' in the absence of any supporting evidence and with plenty pointing the other way. I did everything I could to circulate his work which I felt was asking the pivotal questions that needed an answer. I can recommend an excellent pull-together interview he did with the website The Last Vagabond entitled *Dr Andrew Kaufman: Virus Isolation, Terrain Theory and Covid-19* and his website is andrewkaufmanmd.com. Kaufman is not only a forensic psychiatrist; he is forensic in all that he does. He always reads original scientific papers, experiments and studies instead of second-third-fourth-hand reports about the 'virus' in the media which are repeating the repeated repetition of the narrative. When he did so with the original Chinese 'virus' papers Kaufman

realised that there was no evidence of a 'SARS-Cov-2'. They had never – from the start – shown it to exist and every repeat of this claim worldwide was based on the accepted existence of proof that was nowhere to be found – see Kary Mullis and HIV. Here we go again.

Let's postulate

Kaufman discovered that the Chinese authorities immediately concluded that the cause of an illness that broke out among about 200 initial patients in Wuhan was a 'new virus' when there were no grounds to make that conclusion. The alleged 'virus' was not isolated from other genetic material in their samples and then shown through a system known as Koch's postulates to be the causative agent of the illness. The world was told that the SARS-Cov-2 'virus' caused a disease they called 'Covid-19' which had 'flu-like' symptoms and could lead to respiratory problems and pneumonia. If it wasn't so tragic it would almost be funny. *'Flu-like' symptoms'? Pneumonia? Respiratory disease?* What in *CHINA* and particularly in *Wuhan*, one of the most polluted cities in the world with a resulting epidemic of respiratory disease?? Three hundred thousand people get pneumonia in China every year and there are nearly a billion cases worldwide of 'flu-like symptoms'. These have a whole range of causes – including pollution in Wuhan – but no other possibility was credibly considered in late 2019 when the world was told there was a new and deadly 'virus'. The global prevalence of pneumonia and 'flu-like systems' gave the Cult networks unlimited potential to re-diagnose these other causes as the mythical 'Covid-19' and that is what they did from the very start. Kaufman revealed how Chinese medical and science authorities (all subordinates to the Cult-owned communist government) took genetic material from the lungs of only a few of the first patients. The material contained their own cells, bacteria, fungi and other microorganisms living in their bodies. The only way you could prove the existence of the 'virus' and its responsibility for the alleged 'Covid-19' was to isolate the virus from all the other material – a process also known as 'purification' – and

then follow the postulates sequence developed in the late 19th century by German physician and bacteriologist Robert Koch which became the 'gold standard' for connecting an alleged causation agent to a disease:

1. The microorganism (bacteria, fungus, virus, etc.) must be present in every case of the disease and all patients must have the same symptoms. It must also *not be present in healthy individuals*.

2. The microorganism must be isolated from the host with the disease. If the microorganism is a bacteria or fungus it must be grown in a pure culture. If it is a virus, it must be purified (i.e. containing no other material except the virus particles) from a clinical sample.

3. The specific disease, with all of its characteristics, must be reproduced when the infectious agent (the purified virus or a pure culture of bacteria or fungi) is inoculated into a healthy, susceptible host.

4. The microorganism must be recoverable from the experimentally infected host as in step 2.

Not one of these criteria has been met in the case of 'SARS-Cov-2' and 'Covid-19'. Not ONE. *EVER*. Robert Koch refers to bacteria and not viruses. What are called 'viral particles' are so minute (hence masks are useless by any definition) that they could only be seen after the invention of the electron microscope in the 1930s and can still only be observed through that means. American bacteriologist and virologist Thomas Milton Rivers, the so-called 'Father of Modern Virology' who was very significantly director of the Rockefeller Institute for Medical Research in the 1930s, developed a less stringent version of Koch's postulates to identify 'virus' causation known as 'Rivers criteria'. 'Covid' did not pass that process either. Some even doubt whether any 'virus' can be isolated from other particles containing genetic material in the Koch method. Freedom of Information requests in many countries asking for scientific proof that the 'Covid virus' has been purified and isolated and shown to exist have all come back with a 'we don't have that' and when this happened with a request to the UK Department of Health they added this comment:

However, outside of the scope of the [Freedom of Information Act] and on a discretionary basis, the following information has been advised to us, which may be of interest. Most infectious diseases are caused by viruses, bacteria or fungi. Some bacteria or fungi have the capacity to grow on their own in isolation, for example in colonies on a petri dish. Viruses are different in that they are what we call 'obligate pathogens' – that is, they cannot survive or reproduce without infecting a host ...

… For some diseases, it is possible to establish causation between a microorganism and a disease by isolating the pathogen from a patient, growing it in pure culture and reintroducing it to a healthy organism. These are known as 'Koch's postulates' and were developed in 1882. However, as our understanding of disease and different disease-causing agents has advanced, these are no longer the method for determining causation [Andrew Kaufman asks why in that case are there two published articles falsely claiming to satisfy Koch's postulates].

It has long been known that viral diseases cannot be identified in this way as viruses cannot be grown in 'pure culture'. When a patient is tested for a viral illness, this is normally done by looking for the presence of antigens, or viral genetic code in a host with molecular biology techniques [Kaufman asks how you could know the origin of these chemicals without having a pure culture for comparison].

For the record 'antigens' are defined so:

Invading microorganisms have antigens on their surface that the human body can recognise as being foreign – meaning not belonging to it. When the body recognises a foreign antigen, lymphocytes (white blood cells) produce antibodies, which are complementary in shape to the antigen.

Notwithstanding that this is open to question in relation to 'SARS-Cov-2' the presence of 'antibodies' can have many causes and they are found in people that are perfectly well. Kary Mullis said: 'Antibodies … had always been considered evidence of past disease, not present disease.'

'Covid' really is a *computer* 'virus'

Where the UK Department of Health statement says 'viruses' are now 'diagnosed' through a 'viral genetic code in a host with molecular biology techniques', they mean … *the PCR test* which its inventor said cannot test for infectious disease. They have no credible method of connecting a 'virus' to a disease and we will see that there is no scientific proof that any 'virus' causes any disease or there is any such thing as a 'virus' in the way that it is described. Tenacious Canadian researcher Christine Massey and her team made

some 40 Freedom of Information requests to national public health agencies in different countries asking for proof that SARS-CoV-2 has been isolated and not one of them could supply that information. Massey said of her request in Canada: 'Freedom of Information reveals Public Health Agency of Canada has no record of 'SARS-COV-2' isolation performed by anyone, anywhere, ever.' If you accept the comment from the UK Department of Health it's because they can't isolate a 'virus'. Even so many 'science' papers claimed to have isolated the 'Covid virus' until they were questioned and had to admit they hadn't. A reply from the Robert Koch Institute in Germany was typical: 'I am not aware of a paper which purified isolated SARS-CoV-2.' So what the hell was Christian Drosten and his gang using to design the 'Covid' testing protocol that has produced all the illusory Covid' cases and 'Covid' deaths when the head of the Chinese version of the CDC admitted there was a problem right from the start in that the 'virus' had never been isolated/purified? Breathe deeply: What they are calling 'Covid' is actually created by a *computer program* i.e. *they made it up* – er, that's it. They took lung fluid, with many sources of genetic material, from one single person alleged to be infected with Covid-19 by a PCR test which they *claimed*, without clear evidence, contained a 'virus'. They used several computer programs to create a model of a theoretical virus genome sequence from more than fifty-six million small sequences of RNA, each of an unknown source, assembling them like a puzzle with no known solution. The computer filled in the gaps with sequences from bits in the gene bank to make it look like a bat SARS-like coronavirus! A wave of the magic wand and poof, an in silico (computer-generated) genome, a scientific fantasy, was created. UK health researcher Dr Kevin Corbett made the same point with this analogy:

> … It's like giving you a few bones and saying that's your fish. It could be any fish. Not even a skeleton. Here's a few fragments of bones. That's your fish … It's all from gene bank and the bits of the virus sequence that weren't there they made up.
>
> They synthetically created them to fill in the blanks. That's what genetics is; it's a code. So it's ABBBCCDDD and you're missing some what you think is EEE so you put it in. It's all

synthetic. You just manufacture the bits that are missing. This is the end result of the geneticization of virology. This is basically a computer virus.

Further confirmation came in an email exchange between British citizen journalist Frances Leader and the government's Medicines & Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency (the Gates-funded MHRA) which gave emergency permission for untested 'Covid vaccines' to be used. The agency admitted that the 'vaccine' is not based on an isolated 'virus', but comes from a *computer-generated model*. Frances Leader was naturally banned from Cult-owned fascist Twitter for making this exchange public. The process of creating computer-generated alleged 'viruses' is called 'in silico' or 'in silicon' – computer chips – and the term 'in silico' is believed to originate with biological experiments using only a computer in 1989. 'Vaccines' involved with 'Covid' are also produced 'in silico' or by computer not a natural process. If the original 'virus' is nothing more than a made-up computer model how can there be 'new variants' of something that never existed in the first place? They are not new 'variants'; they are new *computer models* only minutely different to the original program and designed to further terrify the population into having the 'vaccine' and submitting to fascism. You want a 'new variant'? Click, click, enter – there you go. Tell the medical profession that you have discovered a 'South African variant', 'UK variants' or a 'Brazilian variant' and in the usual HIV-causes-AIDS manner they will unquestioningly repeat it with no evidence whatsoever to support these claims. They will go on television and warn about the dangers of 'new variants' while doing nothing more than repeating what they have been told to be true and knowing that any deviation from that would be career suicide. Big-time insiders will know it's a hoax, but much of the medical community is clueless about the way they are being played and themselves play the public without even being aware they are doing so. What an interesting 'coincidence' that AstraZeneca and Oxford University were conducting 'Covid vaccine trials' in the three countries – the UK, South Africa and Brazil – where the first three 'variants' were claimed to have 'broken out'.

Here's your 'virus' – it's a unicorn

Dr Andrew Kaufman presented a brilliant analysis describing how the 'virus' was imagined into fake existence when he dissected an article published by *Nature* and written by 19 authors detailing *alleged* 'sequencing of a complete viral genome' of the 'new SARS-CoV-2 virus'. This computer-modelled *in silico* genome was used as a template for all subsequent genome sequencing experiments that resulted in the so-called variants which he said now number more than *6,000*. The fake genome was constructed from more than 56 million individual short strands of RNA. Those little pieces were assembled into longer pieces by finding areas of overlapping sequences. The computer programs created over two million possible combinations from which the authors simply chose the longest one. They then compared this to a 'bat virus' and the computer 'alignment' rearranged the sequence and filled in the gaps! They called this computer-generated abomination the 'complete genome'. Dr Tom Cowan, a fellow medical author and collaborator with Kaufman, said such computer-generation constitutes scientific fraud and he makes this superb analogy:

> Here is an equivalency: A group of researchers claim to have found a unicorn because they found a piece of a hoof, a hair from a tail, and a snippet of a horn. They then add that information into a computer and program it to re-create the unicorn, and they then claim this computer re-creation is the real unicorn. Of course, they had never actually seen a unicorn so could not possibly have examined its genetic makeup to compare their samples with the actual unicorn's hair, hooves and horn.
>
> The researchers claim they decided which is the real genome of SARS-CoV-2 by 'consensus', sort of like a vote. Again, different computer programs will come up with different versions of the imaginary 'unicorn', so they come together as a group and decide which is the real imaginary unicorn.

This is how the 'virus' that has transformed the world was brought into fraudulent 'existence'. Extraordinary, yes, but as the Nazis said the bigger the lie the more will believe it. Cowan, however, wasn't finished and he went on to identify what he called the real blockbuster in the paper. He quotes this section from a paper written

by virologists and published by the CDC and then explains what it means:

Therefore, we examined the capacity of SARS-CoV-2 to infect and replicate in several common primate and human cell lines, including human adenocarcinoma cells (A549), human liver cells (HUH 7.0), and human embryonic kidney cells (HEK-293T). In addition to Vero E6 and Vero CCL81 cells. ... Each cell line was inoculated at high multiplicity of infection and examined 24h post-infection.

No CPE was observed in any of the cell lines except in Vero cells, which grew to greater than 10 to the 7th power at 24 h post-infection. In contrast, HUH 7.0 and 293T showed only modest viral replication, and A549 cells were incompatible with SARS CoV-2 infection.

Cowan explains that when virologists attempt to prove infection they have three possible 'hosts' or models on which they can test. The first was humans. Exposure to humans was generally not done for ethical reasons and has never been done with SARS-CoV-2 or any coronavirus. The second possible host was animals. Cowan said that forgetting for a moment that they never actually use purified virus when exposing animals they do use solutions that they *claim* contain the virus. Exposure to animals has been done with SARS-CoV-2 in an experiment involving mice and this is what they found: *None of the wild (normal) mice got sick*. In a group of genetically-modified mice, a statistically insignificant number lost weight and had slightly bristled fur, but they experienced nothing like the illness called 'Covid-19'. Cowan said the third method – the one they mostly rely on – is to inoculate solutions they *say* contain the virus onto a variety of tissue cultures. This process had never been shown to kill tissue *unless* the sample material was starved of nutrients and poisoned as *part of the process*. Yes, incredibly, in tissue experiments designed to show the 'virus' is responsible for killing the tissue they starve the tissue of nutrients and add toxic drugs including antibiotics and they do not have control studies to see if it's the starvation and poisoning that is degrading the tissue rather than the 'virus' they allege to be in there somewhere. You want me to pinch you? Yep, I understand. Tom Cowan said this about the whole nonsensical farce as he explains what that quote from the CDC paper really means:

The shocking thing about the above quote is that using their own methods, the virologists found that solutions containing SARS-CoV-2 – even in high amounts – were NOT, I repeat NOT, infective to any of the three human tissue cultures they tested. In plain English, this means they proved, on their terms, that this 'new coronavirus' is not infectious to human beings. It is ONLY infective to monkey kidney cells, and only then when you add two potent drugs (gentamicin and amphotericin), known to be toxic to kidneys, to the mix.

My friends, read this again and again. These virologists, published by the CDC, performed a clear proof, on their terms, showing that the SARS-CoV-2 virus is harmless to human beings. That is the only possible conclusion, but, unfortunately, this result is not even mentioned in their conclusion. They simply say they can provide virus stocks cultured only on monkey Vero cells, thanks for coming.

Cowan concluded: 'If people really understood how this "science" was done, I would hope they would storm the gates and demand honesty, transparency and truth.' Dr Michael Yeadon, former Vice President and Chief Scientific Adviser at drug giant Pfizer has been a vocal critic of the 'Covid vaccine' and its potential for multiple harm. He said in an interview in April, 2021, that 'not one [vaccine] has the virus. He was asked why vaccines normally using a 'dead' version of a disease to activate the immune system were not used for 'Covid' and instead we had the synthetic methods of the 'mRNA Covid vaccine'. Yeadon said that to do the former 'you'd have to have some of [the virus] wouldn't you?' He added: 'No-one's got any – seriously.' Yeadon said that surely they couldn't have fooled the whole world for a year without having a virus, 'but oddly enough ask around – no one's got it'. He didn't know why with all the 'great labs' around the world that the virus had not been isolated – 'Maybe they've been too busy running bad PCR tests and vaccines that people don't need.' What is today called 'science' is not 'science' at all. Science is no longer what is, but whatever people can be manipulated to *believe* that it is. Real science has been hijacked by the Cult to dispense and produce the 'expert scientists' and contentions that suit the agenda of the Cult. How big-time this has happened with the 'Covid' hoax which is entirely based on fake science delivered by fake 'scientists' and fake 'doctors'. The human-caused climate change hoax is also entirely based on fake science delivered by fake 'scientists' and fake 'climate experts'. In both cases real

scientists, climate experts and doctors have their views suppressed and deleted by the Cult-owned science establishment, media and Silicon Valley. This is the 'science' that politicians claim to be 'following' and a common denominator of 'Covid' and climate are Cult psychopaths Bill Gates and his mate Klaus Schwab at the Gates-funded World Economic Forum. But, don't worry, it's all just a coincidence and absolutely nothing to worry about. *Zzzzzzzz*.

What is a 'virus' REALLY?

Dr Tom Cowan is one of many contesting the very existence of viruses let alone that they cause disease. This is understandable when there is no scientific evidence for a disease-causing 'virus'. German virologist Dr Stefan Lanka won a landmark case in 2017 in the German Supreme Court over his contention that there is no such thing as a measles virus. He had offered a big prize for anyone who could prove there is and Lanka won his case when someone sought to claim the money. There is currently a prize of more than 225,000 euros on offer from an Isolate Truth Fund for anyone who can prove the isolation of SARS-CoV-2 and its genetic substance. Lanka wrote in an article headed 'The Misconception Called Virus' that scientists think a 'virus' is causing tissue to become diseased and degraded when in fact it is the *processes they are using* which do that – not a 'virus'. Lanka has done an important job in making this point clear as Cowan did in his analysis of the CDC paper. Lanka says that all claims about viruses as disease-causing pathogens are wrong and based on 'easily recognisable, understandable and verifiable misinterpretations.' Scientists believed they were working with 'viruses' in their laboratories when they were really working with 'typical particles of specific dying tissues or cells …' Lanka said that the tissue decaying process claimed to be caused by a 'virus' still happens when no alleged 'virus' is involved. It's the *process* that does the damage and not a 'virus'. The genetic sample is deprived of nutrients, removed from its energy supply through removal from the body and then doused in toxic antibiotics to remove any bacteria. He confirms again that establishment scientists do not (pinch me)

conduct control experiments to see if this is the case and if they did they would see the claims that 'viruses' are doing the damage is nonsense. He adds that during the measles 'virus' court case he commissioned an independent laboratory to perform just such a control experiment and the result was that the tissues and cells died in the exact same way as with alleged 'infected' material. This is supported by a gathering number of scientists, doctors and researchers who reject what is called 'germ theory' or the belief in the body being infected by contagious sources emitted by other people. Researchers Dawn Lester and David Parker take the same stance in their highly-detailed and sourced book *What Really Makes You Ill – Why everything you thought you knew about disease is wrong* which was recommended to me by a number of medical professionals genuinely seeking the truth. Lester and Parker say there is no provable scientific evidence to show that a 'virus' can be transmitted between people or people and animals or animals and people:

> The definition also claims that viruses are the cause of many diseases, as if this has been definitively proven. But this is not the case; there is no original scientific evidence that definitively demonstrates that any virus is the cause of any disease. The burden of proof for any theory lies with those who proposed it; but none of the existing documents provides 'proof' that supports the claim that 'viruses' are pathogens.

Dr Tom Cowan employs one of his clever analogies to describe the process by which a 'virus' is named as the culprit for a disease when what is called a 'virus' is only material released by cells detoxing themselves from infiltration by chemical or radiation poisoning. The tidal wave of technologically-generated radiation in the 'smart' modern world plus all the toxic food and drink are causing this to happen more than ever. Deluded 'scientists' misread this as a gathering impact of what they wrongly label 'viruses'.

Paper can infect houses

Cowan said in an article for davidicke.com – with his tongue only mildly in his cheek – that he believed he had made a tremendous

discovery that may revolutionise science. He had discovered that small bits of paper are alive, 'well alive-ish', can 'infect' houses, and then reproduce themselves inside the house. The result was that this explosion of growth in the paper inside the house causes the house to explode, blowing it to smithereens. His evidence for this new theory is that in the past months he had carefully examined many of the houses in his neighbourhood and found almost no scraps of paper on the lawns and surrounds of the house. There was an occasional stray label, but nothing more. Then he would return to these same houses a week or so later and with a few, not all of them, particularly the old and decrepit ones, he found to his shock and surprise they were littered with stray bits of paper. He knew then that the paper had infected these houses, made copies of itself, and blew up the house. A young boy on a bicycle at one of the sites told him he had seen a demolition crew using dynamite to explode the house the previous week, but Cowan dismissed this as the idle thoughts of silly boys because 'I was on to something big'. He was on to how 'scientists' mistake genetic material in the detoxifying process for something they call a 'virus'. Cowan said of his house and paper story:

> If this sounds crazy to you, it's because it should. This scenario is obviously nuts. But consider this admittedly embellished, for effect, current viral theory that all scientists, medical doctors and virologists currently believe.

He takes the example of the 'novel SARS-Cov2' virus to prove the point. First they take someone with an undefined illness called 'Covid-19' and don't even attempt to find any virus in their sputum. Never mind the scientists still describe how this 'virus', which they have not located attaches to a cell receptor, injects its genetic material, in 'Covid's' case, RNA, into the cell. The RNA once inserted exploits the cell to reproduce itself and makes 'thousands, nay millions, of copies of itself … Then it emerges victorious to claim its next victim':

If you were to look in the scientific literature for proof, actual scientific proof, that uniform SARS-CoV2 viruses have been properly isolated from the sputum of a sick person, that actual spike proteins could be seen protruding from the virus (which has not been found), you would find that such evidence doesn't exist.

If you go looking in the published scientific literature for actual pictures, proof, that these spike proteins or any viral proteins are ever attached to any receptor embedded in any cell membrane, you would also find that no such evidence exists. If you were to look for a video or documented evidence of the intact virus injecting its genetic material into the body of the cell, reproducing itself and then emerging victorious by budding off the cell membrane, you would find that no such evidence exists.

The closest thing you would find is electron micrograph pictures of cellular particles, possibly attached to cell debris, both of which to be seen were stained by heavy metals, a process that completely distorts their architecture within the living organism. This is like finding bits of paper stuck to the blown-up bricks, thereby proving the paper emerged by taking pieces of the bricks on its way out.

The Enders baloney

Cowan describes the 'Covid' story as being just as make-believe as his paper story and he charts back this fantasy to a Nobel Prize winner called John Enders (1897-1985), an American biomedical scientist who has been dubbed 'The Father of Modern Vaccines'. Enders is claimed to have 'discovered' the process of the viral culture which 'proved' that a 'virus' caused measles. Cowan explains how Enders did this 'by using the EXACT same procedure that has been followed by every virologist to find and characterize every new virus since 1954'. Enders took throat swabs from children with measles and immersed them in 2ml of milk. Penicillin (100u/ml) and the antibiotic streptomycin (50,g/ml) were added and the whole mix was centrifuged – rotated at high speed to separate large cellular debris from small particles and molecules as with milk and cream, for example. Cowan says that if the aim is to find little particles of genetic material ('viruses') in the snot from children with measles it would seem that the last thing you would do is mix the snot with other material – milk –that also has genetic material. 'How are you ever going to know whether whatever you found came from the snot or the milk?' He points out that streptomycin is a 'nephrotoxic' or poisonous-to-the-kidney drug. You will see the relevance of that

shortly. Cowan says that it gets worse, much worse, when Enders describes the culture medium upon which the virus 'grows': 'The culture medium consisted of bovine amniotic fluid (90%), beef embryo extract (5%), horse serum (5%), antibiotics and phenol red as an indicator of cell metabolism.' Cowan asks incredulously: 'Did he just say that the culture medium also contained fluids and tissues that are themselves rich sources of genetic material?' The genetic cocktail, or 'medium', is inoculated onto tissue and cells from rhesus monkey *kidney* tissue. This is where the importance of streptomycin comes in and currently-used antimicrobials and other drugs that are *poisonous to kidneys* and used in ALL modern viral cultures (e.g. gentamicin, streptomycin, and amphotericin). Cowan asks: 'How are you ever going to know from this witch's brew where any genetic material comes from as we now have five different sources of rich genetic material in our mix?' Remember, he says, that all genetic material, whether from monkey kidney tissues, bovine serum, milk, etc., is made from the exact same components. The same central question returns: 'How are you possibly going to know that it was the virus that killed the kidney tissue and not the toxic antibiotic and starvation rations on which you are growing the tissue?' John Enders answered the question himself – *you can't*:

A second agent was obtained from an uninoculated culture of monkey kidney cells. The cytopathic changes [death of the cells] it induced in the unstained preparations could not be distinguished with confidence from the viruses isolated from measles.

The death of the cells ('cytopathic changes') happened in exactly the same manner, whether they inoculated the kidney tissue with the measles snot or not, Cowan says. 'This is evidence that the destruction of the tissue, the very proof of viral causation of illness, was not caused by anything in the snot because they saw the same destructive effect when the snot was not even used … the cytopathic, i.e., cell-killing, changes come from the process of the culture itself, not from any virus in any snot, period.' Enders quotes in his 1957 paper a virologist called Ruckle as reporting similar findings 'and in addition has isolated an agent from monkey kidney tissue that is so

far indistinguishable from human measles virus'. In other words, Cowan says, these particles called 'measles viruses' are simply and clearly breakdown products of the starved and poisoned tissue. For measles 'virus' see all 'viruses' including the so-called 'Covid virus'. Enders, the 'Father of Modern Vaccines', also said:

There is a potential risk in employing cultures of primate cells for the production of vaccines composed of attenuated virus, since the presence of other agents possibly latent in primate tissues cannot be definitely excluded by any known method.

Cowan further quotes from a paper published in the journal *Viruses* in May, 2020, while the 'Covid pandemic' was well underway in the media if not in reality. 'EVs' here refers to particles of genetic debris from our own tissues, such as exosomes of which more in a moment: 'The remarkable resemblance between EVs and viruses has caused quite a few problems in the studies focused on the analysis of EVs released during viral infections.' Later the paper adds that to date a reliable method that can actually guarantee a complete separation (of EVs from viruses) DOES NOT EXIST. This was published at a time when a fairy tale 'virus' was claimed in total certainty to be causing a fairy tale 'viral disease' called 'Covid-19' – a fairy tale that was already well on the way to transforming human society in the image that the Cult has worked to achieve for so long. Cowan concludes his article:

To summarize, there is no scientific evidence that pathogenic viruses exist. What we think of as 'viruses' are simply the normal breakdown products of dead and dying tissues and cells. When we are well, we make fewer of these particles; when we are starved, poisoned, suffocated by wearing masks, or afraid, we make more.

There is no engineered virus circulating and making people sick. People in laboratories all over the world are making genetically modified products to make people sick. These are called vaccines. There is no virome, no 'ecosystem' of viruses, viruses are not 8%, 50% or 100 % of our genetic material. These are all simply erroneous ideas based on the misconception called a virus.

What is 'Covid'? Load of bollocks

The background described here by Cowan and Lanka was emphasised in the first video presentation that I saw by Dr Andrew Kaufman when he asked whether the 'Covid virus' was in truth a natural defence mechanism of the body called 'exosomes'. These are released by cells when in states of toxicity – see the same themes returning over and over. They are released ever more profusely as chemical and radiation toxicity increases and think of the potential effect therefore of 5G alone as its destructive frequencies infest the human energetic information field with a gathering pace (5G went online in Wuhan in 2019 as the 'virus' emerged). I'll have more about this later. Exosomes transmit a warning to the rest of the body that 'Houston, we have a problem'. Kaufman presented images of exosomes and compared them with 'Covid' under an electron microscope and the similarity was remarkable. They both attach to the same cell receptors (*claimed* in the case of 'Covid'), contain the same genetic material in the form of RNA or ribonucleic acid, and both are found in 'viral cell cultures' with damaged or dying cells. James Hildreth MD, President and Chief Executive Officer of the Meharry Medical College at Johns Hopkins, said: 'The virus is fully an exosome in every sense of the word.' Kaufman's conclusion was that there is no 'virus': 'This entire pandemic is a completely manufactured crisis … there is no evidence of anyone dying from [this] illness.' Dr Tom Cowan and Sally Fallon Morell, authors of *The Contagion Myth*, published a statement with Dr Kaufman in February, 2021, explaining why the 'virus' does not exist and you can read it that in full in the Appendix.

'Virus' theory can be traced to the 'cell theory' in 1858 of German physician Rudolf Virchow (1821-1920) who contended that disease originates from a single cell infiltrated by a 'virus'. Dr Stefan Lanka said that findings and insights with respect to the structure, function and central importance of tissues in the creation of life, which were already known in 1858, comprehensively refute the cell theory. Virchow ignored them. We have seen the part later played by John Enders in the 1950s and Lanka notes that infection theories were only established as a global dogma through the policies and

eugenics of the Third Reich in Nazi Germany (creation of the same Sabbatian cult behind the 'Covid' hoax). Lanka said: 'Before 1933, scientists dared to contradict this theory; after 1933, these critical scientists were silenced'. Dr Tom Cowan's view is that ill-heath is caused by too much of something, too little of something, or toxification from chemicals and radiation – not contagion. We must also highlight as a major source of the 'virus' theology a man still called the 'Father of Modern Virology' – Thomas Milton Rivers (1888-1962). There is no way given the Cult's long game policy that it was a coincidence for the 'Father of Modern Virology' to be director of the Rockefeller Institute for Medical Research from 1937 to 1956 when he is credited with making the Rockefeller Institute a leader in 'viral research'. Cult Rockefellers were the force behind the creation of Big Pharma 'medicine', established the World Health Organisation in 1948, and have long and close associations with the Gates family that now runs the WHO during the pandemic hoax through mega-rich Cult gofer and psychopath Bill Gates.

Only a Renegade Mind can see through all this bullshit by asking the questions that need to be answered, not taking 'no' or prevarication for an answer, and certainly not hiding from the truth in fear of speaking it. Renegade Minds have always changed the world for the better and they will change this one no matter how bleak it may currently appear to be.

CHAPTER SIX

Sequence of deceit

If you tell the truth, you don't have to remember anything
Mark Twain

Against the background that I have laid out this far the sequence that took us from an invented 'virus' in Cult-owned China in late 2019 to the fascist transformation of human society can be seen and understood in a whole new context.

We were told that a deadly disease had broken out in Wuhan and the world media began its campaign (coordinated by behavioural psychologists as we shall see) to terrify the population into unquestioning compliance. We were shown images of Chinese people collapsing in the street which never happened in the West with what was supposed to be the same condition. In the earliest days when alleged cases and deaths were few the fear register was hysterical in many areas of the media and this would expand into the common media narrative across the world. The real story was rather different, but we were never told that. The Chinese government, one of the Cult's biggest centres of global operation, said they had discovered a new illness with flu-like and pneumonia-type symptoms in a city with such toxic air that it is overwhelmed with flu-like symptoms, pneumonia and respiratory disease. Chinese scientists said it was a new – 'novel' – coronavirus which they called Sars-Cov-2 and that it caused a disease they labelled 'Covid-19'. There was no evidence for this and the 'virus' has never to this day been isolated, purified and its genetic code established from that. It

was from the beginning a computer-generated fiction. Stories of Chinese whistleblowers saying the number of deaths was being supressed or that the 'new disease' was related to the Wuhan bio-lab misdirected mainstream and alternative media into cul-de-sacs to obscure the real truth – there was no 'virus'.

Chinese scientists took genetic material from the lung fluid of just a few people and said they had found a 'new' disease when this material had a wide range of content. There was no evidence for a 'virus' for the very reasons explained in the last two chapters. The 'virus' has never been shown to (a) exist and (b) cause any disease. People were diagnosed on symptoms that are so widespread in Wuhan and polluted China and with a PCR test that can't detect infectious disease. On this farce the whole global scam was sold to the rest of the world which would also diagnose respiratory disease as 'Covid-19' from symptoms alone or with a PCR test not testing for a 'virus'. Flu miraculously disappeared *worldwide* in 2020 and into 2021 as it was redesignated 'Covid-19'. It was really the same old flu with its 'flu-like' symptoms attributed to 'flu-like' 'Covid-19'. At the same time with very few exceptions the Chinese response of draconian lockdown and fascism was the chosen weapon to respond across the West as recommended by the Cult-owned Tedros at the Cult-owned World Health Organization run by the Cult-owned Gates. All was going according to plan. Chinese scientists – everything in China is controlled by the Cult-owned government – compared their contaminated RNA lung-fluid material with other RNA sequences and said it appeared to be just under 80 percent identical to the SARS-CoV-1 'virus' claimed to be the cause of the SARS (severe acute respiratory syndrome) 'outbreak' in 2003. They decreed that because of this the 'new virus' had to be related and they called it SARS-CoV-2. There are some serious problems with this assumption and *assumption* was all it was. Most 'factual' science turns out to be assumptions repeated into everyone-knows-that. A match of under 80-percent is meaningless. Dr Kaufman makes the point that there's a *96 percent* genetic correlation between humans and chimpanzees, but 'no one would say our genetic material is part

of the chimpanzee family'. Yet the Chinese authorities were claiming that a much lower percentage, less than 80 percent, proved the existence of a new 'coronavirus'. For goodness sake human DNA is 60 percent similar to a *banana*.

You are feeling sleepy

The entire 'Covid' hoax is a global Psyop, a psychological operation to program the human mind into believing and fearing a complete fantasy. A crucial aspect of this was what *appeared* to happen in Italy. It was all very well streaming out daily images of an alleged catastrophe in Wuhan, but to the Western mind it was still on the other side of the world in a very different culture and setting. A reaction of 'this could happen to me and my family' was still nothing like as intense enough for the mind-doctors. The Cult needed a Western example to push people over that edge and it chose Italy, one of its major global locations going back to the Roman Empire. An Italian 'Covid' crisis was manufactured in a particular area called Lombardy which just happens to be notorious for its toxic air and therefore respiratory disease. Wuhan, China, déjà vu. An hysterical media told horror stories of Italians dying from 'Covid' in their droves and how Lombardy hospitals were being overrun by a tidal wave of desperately ill people needing treatment after being struck down by the 'deadly virus'. Here was the psychological turning point the Cult had planned. Wow, if this is happening in Italy, the Western mind concluded, this indeed could happen to me and my family. Another point is that Italian authorities responded by following the Chinese blueprint so vehemently recommended by the Cult-owned World Health Organization. They imposed fascistic lockdowns on the whole country viciously policed with the help of surveillance drones sweeping through the streets seeking out anyone who escaped from mass house arrest. Livelihoods were destroyed and psychology unravelled in the way we have witnessed since in all lockdown countries. Crucial to the plan was that Italy responded in this way to set the precedent of suspending freedom and imposing fascism in a 'Western liberal democracy'. I emphasised in an

animated video explanation on davidicke.com posted in the summer of 2020 how important it was to the Cult to expand the Chinese lockdown model across the West. Without this, and the bare-faced lie that non-symptomatic people could still transmit a 'disease' they didn't have, there was no way locking down the whole population, sick and not sick, could be pulled off. At just the right time and with no evidence Cult operatives and gofers claimed that people without symptoms could pass on the 'disease'. In the name of protecting the 'vulnerable' like elderly people, who lockdowns would kill by the tens of thousands, we had for the first time healthy people told to isolate as well as the sick. The great majority of people who tested positive had no symptoms because there was nothing wrong with them. It was just a trick made possible by a test not testing for the 'virus'.

Months after my animated video the Gates-funded Professor Neil Ferguson at the Gates-funded Imperial College confirmed that I was right. He didn't say it in those terms, naturally, but he did say it. Ferguson will enter the story shortly for his outrageously crazy 'computer models' that led to Britain, the United States and many other countries following the Chinese and now Italian methods of response. Put another way, following the Cult script. Ferguson said that SAGE, the UK government's scientific advisory group which has controlled 'Covid' policy from the start, wanted to follow the Chinese lockdown model (while they all continued to work and be paid), but they wondered if they could possibly, in Ferguson's words, 'get away with it in Europe'. 'Get away with it'? Who the hell do these moronic, arrogant people think they are? This appalling man Ferguson said that once Italy went into national lockdown they realised they, too, could mimic China:

> It's a communist one-party state, we said. We couldn't get away with it in Europe, we thought … and then Italy did it. And we realised we could. Behind this garbage from Ferguson is a simple fact: Doing the same as China in every country was the plan from the start and Ferguson's 'models' would play a central role in achieving that. It's just a coincidence, of course, and absolutely nothing to worry your little head about.

Oops, sorry, our mistake

Once the Italian segment of the Psyop had done the job it was designed to do a very different story emerged. Italian authorities revealed that 99 percent of those who had 'died from Covid-19' in Italy had one, two, three, or more 'co-morbidities' or illnesses and health problems that could have ended their life. The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) published a figure of 94 percent for Americans dying of 'Covid' while having other serious medical conditions – on average two to three (some five or six) other potential causes of death. In terms of death from an unproven 'virus' I say it is 100 percent. The other one percent in Italy and six percent in the US would presumably have died from 'Covid's' flu-like symptoms with a range of other possible causes in conjunction with a test not testing for the 'virus'. Fox News reported that even more startling figures had emerged in one US county in which 410 of 422 deaths attributed to 'Covid-19' had other potentially deadly health conditions. The Italian National Health Institute said later that the average age of people dying with a 'Covid-19' diagnosis in Italy was about 81. Ninety percent were over 70 with ten percent over 90. In terms of other reasons to die some 80 percent had two or more chronic diseases with half having three or more including cardiovascular problems, diabetes, respiratory problems and cancer. Why is the phantom 'Covid-19' said to kill overwhelmingly old people and hardly affect the young? Old people continually die of many causes and especially respiratory disease which you can re-diagnose 'Covid-19' while young people die in tiny numbers by comparison and rarely of respiratory disease. Old people 'die of Covid' because they die of other things that can be redesignated 'Covid' and it really is that simple.

Flu has flown

The blueprint was in place. Get your illusory 'cases' from a test not testing for the 'virus' and redesignate other causes of death as 'Covid-19'. You have an instant 'pandemic' from something that is nothing more than a computer-generated fiction. With near-on a

billion people having 'flu-like' symptoms every year the potential was limitless and we can see why flu quickly and apparently miraculously disappeared *worldwide* by being diagnosed 'Covid-19'. The painfully bloody obvious was explained away by the childlike media in headlines like this in the UK '*Independent*': 'Not a single case of flu detected by Public Health England this year as Covid restrictions suppress virus'. I kid you not. The masking, social distancing and house arrest that did not make the 'Covid virus' disappear somehow did so with the 'flu virus'. Even worse the article, by a bloke called Samuel Lovett, suggested that maybe the masking, sanitising and other 'Covid' measures should continue to keep the flu away. With a ridiculousness that disturbs your breathing (it's 'Covid-19') the said Lovett wrote: 'With widespread social distancing and mask-wearing measures in place throughout the UK, the usual routes of transmission for influenza have been blocked.' He had absolutely no evidence to support that statement, but look at the consequences of him acknowledging the obvious. With flu not disappearing at all and only being relabelled 'Covid-19' he would have to contemplate that 'Covid' was a hoax on a scale that is hard to imagine. You need guts and commitment to truth to even go there and that's clearly something Samuel Lovett does not have in abundance. He would never have got it through the editors anyway.

Tens of thousands die in the United States alone every winter from flu including many with pneumonia complications. CDC figures record *45 million* Americans diagnosed with flu in 2017-2018 of which 61,000 died and some reports claim 80,000. Where was the same hysteria then that we have seen with 'Covid-19'? Some 250,000 Americans are admitted to hospital with pneumonia every year with about 50,000 cases proving fatal. About 65 million suffer respiratory disease every year and three million deaths makes this the third biggest cause of death worldwide. You only have to redesignate a portion of all these people 'Covid-19' and you have an instant global pandemic or the *appearance* of one. Why would doctors do this? They are told to do this and all but a few dare not refuse those who must be obeyed. Doctors in general are not researching their own

knowledge and instead take it direct and unquestioned from the authorities that own them and their careers. The authorities say they must now diagnose these symptoms 'Covid-19' and not flu, or whatever, and they do it. Dark suits say put 'Covid-19' on death certificates no matter what the cause of death and the doctors do it. Renegade Minds don't fall for the illusion that doctors and medical staff are all highly-intelligent, highly-principled, seekers of medical truth. *Some are*, but not the majority. They are repeaters, gofers, and yes sir, no sir, purveyors of what the system demands they purvey. The 'Covid' con is not merely confined to diseases of the lungs. Instructions to doctors to put 'Covid-19' on death certificates for anyone dying of *anything* within 28 days (or much more) of a positive test not testing for the 'virus' opened the floodgates. The term dying *with* 'Covid' and not *of* 'Covid' was coined to cover the truth. Whether it was a *with* or an *of* they were all added to the death numbers attributed to the 'deadly virus' compiled by national governments and globally by the Gates-funded Johns Hopkins operation in the United States that was so involved in those 'pandemic' simulations. Fraudulent deaths were added to the ever-growing list of fraudulent 'cases' from false positives from a false test. No wonder Professor Walter Ricciardi, scientific advisor to the Italian minister of health, said after the Lombardy hysteria had done its job that 'Covid' death rates were due to Italy having the second oldest population in the world and to *how hospitals record deaths*:

The way in which we code deaths in our country is very generous in the sense that all the people who die in hospitals with the coronavirus are deemed to be dying of the coronavirus. On re-evaluation by the National Institute of Health, only 12 per cent of death certificates have shown a direct causality from coronavirus, while 88 per cent of patients who have died have at least one pre-morbidity – many had two or three.

This is extraordinary enough when you consider the propaganda campaign to use Italy to terrify the world, but how can they even say twelve percent were genuine when the 'virus' has not been shown to exist, its 'code' is a computer program, and diagnosis comes from a test not testing for it? As in China, and soon the world, 'Covid-19' in

Italy was a redesignation of diagnosis. Lies and corruption were to become the real 'pandemic' fuelled by a pathetically-compliant medical system taking its orders from the tiny few at the top of their national hierarchy who answered to the World Health Organization which answers to Gates and the Cult. Doctors were told – ordered – to diagnose a particular set of symptoms 'Covid-19' and put that on the death certificate for any cause of death if the patient had tested positive with a test not testing for the virus or had 'Covid' symptoms like the flu. The United States even introduced big financial incentives to manipulate the figures with hospitals receiving £4,600 from the Medicare system for diagnosing someone with regular pneumonia, $13,000 if they made the diagnosis from the same symptoms 'Covid-19' pneumonia, and $39, 000 if they put a 'Covid' diagnosed patient on a ventilator that would almost certainly kill them. A few – painfully and pathetically few – medical whistleblowers revealed (before Cult-owned YouTube deleted their videos) that they had been instructed to 'let the patient crash' and put them straight on a ventilator instead of going through a series of far less intrusive and dangerous methods as they would have done before the pandemic hoax began and the financial incentives kicked in. We are talking cold-blooded murder given that ventilators are so damaging to respiratory systems they are usually the last step before heaven awaits. Renegade Minds never fall for the belief that people in white coats are all angels of mercy and cannot be full-on psychopaths. I have explained in detail in *The Answer* how what I am describing here played out across the world coordinated by the World Health Organization through the medical hierarchies in almost every country.

Medical scientist calls it

Information about the non-existence of the 'virus' began to emerge for me in late March, 2020, and mushroomed after that. I was sent an email by Sir Julian Rose, a writer, researcher, and organic farming promotor, from a medical scientist friend of his in the United States. Even at that early stage in March the scientist was able to explain

how the 'Covid' hoax was being manipulated. He said there were no reliable tests for a specific 'Covid-19 virus' and nor were there any reliable agencies or media outlets for reporting numbers of actual 'Covid-19' cases. We have seen in the long period since then that he was absolutely right. 'Every action and reaction to Covid-19 is based on totally flawed data and we simply cannot make accurate assessments,' he said. Most people diagnosed with 'Covid-19' were showing nothing more than cold and flu-like symptoms 'because most coronavirus strains *are* nothing more than cold/flu-like symptoms'. We had farcical situations like an 84-year-old German man testing positive for 'Covid-19' and his nursing home ordered to quarantine only for him to be found to have a common cold. The scientist described back then why PCR tests and what he called the 'Mickey Mouse test kits' were useless for what they were claimed to be identifying. 'The idea these kits can isolate a specific virus like Covid-19 is nonsense,' he said. Significantly, he pointed out that 'if you want to create a totally false panic about a totally false pandemic – pick a coronavirus'. This is exactly what the Cult-owned Gates, World Economic Forum and Johns Hopkins University did with their Event 201 'simulation' followed by their real-life simulation called the 'pandemic'. The scientist said that all you had to do was select the sickest of people with respiratory-type diseases in a single location – 'say Wuhan' – and administer PCR tests to them. You can then claim that anyone showing 'viral sequences' similar to a coronavirus 'which will inevitably be quite a few' is suffering from a 'new' disease:

> Since you already selected the sickest flu cases a fairly high proportion of your sample will go on to die. You can then say this 'new' virus has a CFR [case fatality rate] higher than the flu and use this to infuse more concern and do more tests which will of course produce more 'cases', which expands the testing, which produces yet more 'cases' and so on and so on. Before long you have your 'pandemic', and all you have done is use a simple test kit trick to convert the worst flu and pneumonia cases into something new that doesn't ACTUALLY EXIST [my emphasis].

He said that you then 'just run the same scam in other countries' and make sure to keep the fear message running high 'so that people

will feel panicky and less able to think critically'. The only problem to overcome was the fact *there is no* actual new deadly pathogen and only regular sick people. This meant that deaths from the 'new deadly pathogen' were going to be way too low for a real new deadly virus pandemic, but he said this could be overcome in the following ways – all of which would go on to happen:

1. You can claim this is just the beginning and more deaths are imminent [you underpin this with fantasy 'computer projections']. Use this as an excuse to quarantine everyone and then claim the quarantine prevented the expected millions of dead.

2. You can [say that people] 'minimizing' the dangers are irresponsible and bully them into not talking about numbers.

3. You can talk crap about made up numbers hoping to blind people with pseudoscience.

4. You can start testing well people (who, of course, will also likely have shreds of coronavirus [RNA] in them) and thus inflate your 'case figures' with 'asymptomatic carriers' (you will of course have to spin that to sound deadly even though any virologist knows the more symptom-less cases you have the less deadly is your pathogen).

The scientist said that if you take these simple steps 'you can have your own entirely manufactured pandemic up and running in weeks'. His analysis made so early in the hoax was brilliantly prophetic of what would actually unfold. Pulling all the information together in these recent chapters we have this is simple 1, 2, 3, of how you can delude virtually the entire human population into believing in a 'virus' that doesn't exist:

- A 'Covid case' is someone who tests positive with a test not testing for the 'virus'.

- A 'Covid death' is someone who dies of *any cause* within 28 days (or much longer) of testing positive with a test not testing for the 'virus.

- Asymptomatic means there is nothing wrong with you, but they claim you can pass on what you don't have to justify locking

down (quarantining) healthy people in totality.

The foundations of the hoax are that simple. A study involving ten million people in Wuhan, published in November, 2020, demolished the whole lie about those without symptoms passing on the 'virus'. They found '300 asymptomatic cases' and traced their contacts to find that not one of them was detected with the 'virus'. 'Asymptomatic' patients and their contacts were isolated for no less than two weeks and nothing changed. I know it's all crap, but if you are going to claim that those without symptoms can transmit 'the virus' then you must produce evidence for that and they never have. Even World Health Organization official Dr Maria Van Kerkhove, head of the emerging diseases and zoonosis unit, said as early as June, 2020, that she doubted the validity of asymptomatic transmission. She said that 'from the data we have, it still seems to be rare that an asymptomatic person actually transmits onward to a secondary individual' and by 'rare' she meant that she couldn't cite any case of asymptomatic transmission.

The Ferguson factor

The problem for the Cult as it headed into March, 2020, when the script had lockdown due to start, was that despite all the manipulation of the case and death figures they still did not have enough people alleged to have died from 'Covid' to justify mass house arrest. This was overcome in the way the scientist described: 'You can claim this is just the beginning and more deaths are imminent … Use this as an excuse to quarantine everyone and then claim the quarantine prevented the expected millions of dead.' Enter one Professor Neil Ferguson, the Gates-funded 'epidemiologist' at the Gates-funded Imperial College in London. Ferguson is Britain's Christian Drosten in that he has a dire record of predicting health outcomes, but is still called upon to advise government on the next health outcome when another 'crisis' comes along. This may seem to be a strange and ridiculous thing to do. Why would you keep turning for policy guidance to people who have a history of being

monumentally wrong? Ah, but it makes sense from the Cult point of view. These 'experts' keep on producing predictions that suit the Cult agenda for societal transformation and so it was with Neil Ferguson as he revealed his horrific (and clearly insane) computer model predictions that allowed lockdowns to be imposed in Britain, the United States and many other countries. Ferguson does not have even an A-level in biology and would appear to have no formal training in computer modelling, medicine or epidemiology, according to Derek Winton, an MSc in Computational Intelligence. He wrote an article somewhat aghast at what Ferguson did which included taking no account of respiratory disease 'seasonality' which means it is far worse in the winter months. Who would have thought that respiratory disease could be worse in the winter? Well, certainly not Ferguson.

The massively China-connected Imperial College and its bizarre professor provided the excuse for the long-incubated Chinese model of human control to travel westward at lightning speed. Imperial College confirms on its website that it collaborates with the Chinese Research Institute; publishes more than 600 research papers every year with Chinese research institutions; has 225 Chinese staff; 2,600 Chinese students – the biggest international group; 7,000 former students living in China which is the largest group outside the UK; and was selected for a tour by China's President Xi Jinping during his state visit to the UK in 2015. The college takes major donations from China and describes itself as the UK's number one university collaborator with Chinese research institutions. The China communist/fascist government did not appear phased by the woeful predictions of Ferguson and Imperial when during the lockdown that Ferguson induced the college signed a five-year collaboration deal with China tech giant Huawei that will have Huawei's indoor 5G network equipment installed at the college's West London tech campus along with an 'AI cloud platform'. The deal includes Chinese sponsorship of Imperial's Venture Catalyst entrepreneurship competition. Imperial is an example of the enormous influence the Chinese government has within British and North American

universities and research centres – and further afield. Up to 200 academics from more than a dozen UK universities are being investigated on suspicion of 'unintentionally' helping the Chinese government build weapons of mass destruction by 'transferring world-leading research in advanced military technology such as aircraft, missile designs and cyberweapons'. Similar scandals have broken in the United States, but it's all a coincidence. Imperial College serves the agenda in many other ways including the promotion of every aspect of the United Nations Agenda 21/2030 (the Great Reset) and produced computer models to show that human-caused 'climate change' is happening when in the real world it isn't. Imperial College is driving the climate agenda as it drives the 'Covid' agenda (both Cult hoaxes) while Patrick Vallance, the UK government's Chief Scientific Adviser on 'Covid', was named Chief Scientific Adviser to the UN 'climate change' conference known as COP26 hosted by the government in Glasgow, Scotland. 'Covid' and 'climate' are fundamentally connected.

Professor Woeful

From Imperial's bosom came Neil Ferguson still advising government despite his previous disasters and it was announced early on that he and other key people like UK Chief Medical Adviser Chris Whitty had caught the 'virus' as the propaganda story was being sold. Somehow they managed to survive and we had Prime Minister Boris Johnson admitted to hospital with what was said to be a severe version of the 'virus' in this same period. His whole policy and demeanour changed when he returned to Downing Street. It's a small world with these government advisors – especially in their communal connections to Gates – and Ferguson had partnered with Whitty to write a paper called 'Infectious disease: Tough choices to reduce Ebola transmission' which involved another scare-story that didn't happen. Ferguson's 'models' predicted that up to150, 000 could die from 'mad cow disease', or BSE, and its version in sheep if it was transmitted to humans. BSE was not transmitted and instead triggered by an organophosphate pesticide used to treat a pest on

cows. Fewer than 200 deaths followed from the human form. Models by Ferguson and his fellow incompetents led to the unnecessary culling of millions of pigs, cattle and sheep in the foot and mouth outbreak in 2001 which destroyed the lives and livelihoods of farmers and their families who had often spent decades building their herds and flocks. Vast numbers of these animals did not have foot and mouth and had no contact with the infection. Another 'expert' behind the cull was Professor Roy Anderson, a computer modeller at Imperial College specialising in the epidemiology of *human*, not animal, disease. Anderson has served on the Bill and Melinda Gates Grand Challenges in Global Health advisory board and chairs another Gates-funded organisation. Gates is everywhere.

In a precursor to the 'Covid' script Ferguson backed closing schools 'for prolonged periods' over the swine flu 'pandemic' in 2009 and said it would affect a third of the world population if it continued to spread at the speed he claimed to be happening. His mates at Imperial College said much the same and a news report said: 'One of the authors, the epidemiologist and disease modeller Neil Ferguson, who sits on the World Health Organisation's emergency committee for the outbreak, said the virus had "full pandemic potential".' Professor Liam Donaldson, the Chris Whitty of his day as Chief Medical Officer, said the worst case could see 30 percent of the British people infected by swine flu with 65,000 dying. Ferguson and Donaldson were indeed proved correct when at the end of the year the number of deaths attributed to swine flu was 392. The term 'expert' is rather liberally applied unfortunately, not least to complete idiots. Swine flu 'projections' were great for GlaxoSmithKline (GSK) as millions rolled in for its Pandemrix influenza vaccine which led to brain damage with children most affected. The British government (taxpayers) paid out more than £60 million in compensation after GSK was given immunity from prosecution. Yet another 'Covid' déjà vu. Swine flu was supposed to have broken out in Mexico, but Dr Wolfgang Wodarg, a German doctor, former member of parliament and critic of the 'Covid' hoax, observed 'the spread of swine flu' in Mexico City at the time. He

said: 'What we experienced in Mexico City was a very mild flu which did not kill more than usual – which killed even fewer people than usual.' Hyping the fear against all the facts is not unique to 'Covid' and has happened many times before. Ferguson is reported to have over-estimated the projected death toll of bird flu (H5N1) by some three million-fold, but bird flu vaccine makers again made a killing from the scare. This is some of the background to the Neil Ferguson who produced the perfectly-timed computer models in early 2020 predicting that half a million people would die in Britain without draconian lockdown and 2.2 million in the United States. Politicians panicked, people panicked, and lockdowns of alleged short duration were instigated to 'flatten the curve' of cases gleaned from a test not testing for the 'virus'. I said at the time that the public could forget the 'short duration' bit. This was an agenda to destroy the livelihoods of the population and force them into mass control through dependency and there was going to be nothing 'short' about it. American researcher Daniel Horowitz described the consequences of the 'models' spewed out by Gates-funded Ferguson and Imperial College:

> What led our government and the governments of many other countries into panic was a single Imperial College of UK study, funded by global warming activists, that predicted 2.2 million deaths if we didn't lock down the country. In addition, the reported 8-9% death rate in Italy scared us into thinking there was some other mutation of this virus that they got, which might have come here.
>
> Together with the fact that we were finally testing and had the ability to actually report new cases, we thought we were headed for a death spiral. But again … we can't flatten a curve if we don't know when the curve started.

How about it *never* started?

Giving them what they want

An investigation by German news outlet *Welt Am Sonntag (World on Sunday)* revealed how in March, 2020, the German government gathered together 'leading scientists from several research institutes and universities' and 'together, they were to produce a [modelling]

paper that would serve as legitimization for further tough political measures'. The Cult agenda was justified by computer modelling not based on evidence or reality; it was specifically constructed to justify the Cult demand for lockdowns all over the world to destroy the independent livelihoods of the global population. All these modellers and everyone responsible for the 'Covid' hoax have a date with a trial like those in Nuremberg after World War Two when Nazis faced the consequences of their war crimes. These corrupt-beyond-belief 'modellers' wrote the paper according to government instructions and it said that that if lockdown measures were lifted then up to one million Germans would die from 'Covid-19' adding that some would die 'agonizingly at home, gasping for breath' unable to be treated by hospitals that couldn't cope. All lies. No matter – it gave the Cult all that it wanted. What did long-time government 'modeller' Neil Ferguson say? If the UK and the United States didn't lockdown half a million would die in Britain and 2.2 million Americans. Anyone see a theme here? 'Modellers' are such a crucial part of the lockdown strategy that we should look into their background and follow the money. Researcher Rosemary Frei produced an excellent article headlined 'The Modelling-paper Mafiosi'. She highlights a guy called John Edmunds, a British epidemiologist, and professor in the Faculty of Epidemiology and Population Health at the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine. He studied at Imperial College. Edmunds is a member of government 'Covid' advisory bodies which have been dictating policy, the New and Emerging Respiratory Virus Threats Advisory Group (NERVTAG) and the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE).

Ferguson, another member of NERVTAG and SAGE, led the way with the original 'virus' and Edmunds has followed in the 'variant' stage and especially the so-called UK or Kent variant known as the 'Variant of Concern' (VOC) B.1.1.7. He said in a co-written report for the Centre for Mathematical modelling of Infectious Diseases at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, with input from the Centre's 'Covid-19' Working Group, that there was 'a realistic

possibility that VOC B.1.1.7 is associated with an increased risk of death compared to non-VOC viruses'. Fear, fear, fear, get the vaccine, fear, fear, fear, get the vaccine. Rosemary Frei reveals that almost all the paper's authors and members of the modelling centre's 'Covid-19' Working Group receive funding from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and/or the associated Gates-funded Wellcome Trust. The paper was published by e-journal *Medr χiv* which only publishes papers not peer-reviewed and the journal was established by an organisation headed by Facebook's Mark Zuckerberg and his missus. What a small world it is. Frei discovered that Edmunds is on the Scientific Advisory Board of the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations (CEPI) which was established by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Klaus Schwab's Davos World Economic Forum and Big Pharma giant Wellcome. CEPI was 'launched in Davos [in 2017] to develop vaccines to stop future epidemics', according to its website. 'Our mission is to accelerate the development of vaccines against emerging infectious diseases and enable equitable access to these vaccines for people during outbreaks.' What kind people they are. Rosemary Frei reveals that Public Health England (PHE) director Susan Hopkins is an author of her organisation's non-peer-reviewed reports on 'new variants'. Hopkins is a professor of infectious diseases at London's Imperial College which is gifted tens of millions of dollars a year by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. Gates-funded modelling disaster Neil Ferguson also co-authors Public Health England reports and he spoke in December, 2020, about the potential danger of the B.1.1.7. 'UK variant' promoted by Gates-funded modeller John Edmunds. When I come to the 'Covid vaccines' the 'new variants' will be shown for what they are – bollocks.

Connections, connections

All these people and modellers are lockdown-obsessed or, put another way, they demand what the Cult demands. Edmunds said in January, 2021, that to ease lockdowns too soon would be a disaster and they had to 'vaccinate much, much, much more widely than the

elderly'. Rosemary Frei highlights that Edmunds is married to Jeanne Pimenta who is described in a LinkedIn profile as director of epidemiology at GlaxoSmithKline (GSK) and she held shares in the company. Patrick Vallance, co-chair of SAGE and the government's Chief Scientific Adviser, is a former executive of GSK and has a deferred bonus of shares in the company worth £600,000. GSK has serious business connections with Bill Gates and is collaborating with mRNA-'vaccine' company CureVac to make 'vaccines' for the new variants that Edmunds is talking about. GSK is planning a 'Covid vaccine' with drug giant Sanofi. Puppet Prime Minister Boris Johnson announced in the spring of 2021 that up to 60 million vaccine doses were to be made at the GSK facility at Barnard Castle in the English North East. Barnard Castle, with a population of just 6,000, was famously visited in breach of lockdown rules in April, 2020, by Johnson aide Dominic Cummings who said that he drove there 'to test his eyesight' before driving back to London. Cummings would be better advised to test his integrity – not that it would take long. The GSK facility had nothing to do with his visit then although I'm sure Patrick Vallance would have been happy to arrange an introduction and some tea and biscuits. Ruthless psychopath Gates has made yet another fortune from vaccines in collaboration with Big Pharma companies and gushes at the phenomenal profits to be made from vaccines – more than a 20-to-1 return as he told one interviewer. Gates also tweeted in December, 2019, with the foreknowledge of what was coming: 'What's next for our foundation? I'm particularly excited about what the next year could mean for one of the best buys in global health: vaccines.'

Modeller John Edmunds is a big promotor of vaccines as all these people appear to be. He's the dean of the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine's Faculty of Epidemiology and Population Health which is primarily funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the Gates-established and funded GAVI vaccine alliance which is the Gates vehicle to vaccinate the world. The organisation Doctors Without Borders has described GAVI as being 'aimed more at supporting drug-industry desires to promote new

products than at finding the most efficient and sustainable means for fighting the diseases of poverty'. But then that's why the psychopath Gates created it. John Edmunds said in a video that the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine is involved in every aspect of vaccine development including large-scale clinical trials. He contends that mathematical modelling can show that vaccines protect individuals and society. That's on the basis of shit in and shit out, I take it. Edmunds serves on the UK Vaccine Network as does Ferguson and the government's foremost 'Covid' adviser, the grim-faced, dark-eyed Chris Whitty. The Vaccine Network says it works 'to support the government to identify and shortlist targeted investment opportunities for the most promising vaccines and vaccine technologies that will help combat infectious diseases with epidemic potential, and to address structural issues related to the UK's broader vaccine infrastructure'. Ferguson is acting Director of the Imperial College Vaccine Impact Modelling Consortium which has funding from the Bill and Melina Gates Foundation and the Gates-created GAVI 'vaccine alliance'. Anyone wonder why these characters see vaccines as the answer to every problem? Ferguson is wildly enthusiastic in his support for GAVI's campaign to vaccine children en masse in poor countries. You would expect someone like Gates who has constantly talked about the need to reduce the population to want to fund vaccines to keep more people alive. I'm sure that's why he does it. The John Edmunds London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine (LSHTM) has a Vaccines Manufacturing Innovation Centre which develops, tests and commercialises vaccines. Rosemary Frei writes:

> The vaccines centre also performs affiliated activities like combating 'vaccine hesitancy'. The latter includes the Vaccine Confidence Project. The project's stated purpose is, among other things, 'to provide analysis and guidance for early response and engagement with the public to ensure sustained confidence in vaccines and immunisation'. The Vaccine Confidence Project's director is LSHTM professor Heidi Larson. For more than a decade she's been researching how to combat vaccine hesitancy.

How the bloody hell can blokes like John Edmunds and Neil Ferguson with those connections and financial ties model 'virus' case

and death projections for the government and especially in a way that gives their paymasters like Gates exactly what they want? It's insane, but this is what you find throughout the world.

'Covid' is not dangerous, oops, wait, yes it is

Only days before Ferguson's nightmare scenario made Jackboot Johnson take Britain into a China-style lockdown to save us from a deadly 'virus' the UK government website gov.uk was reporting something very different to Ferguson on a page of official government guidance for 'high consequence infectious diseases (HCID)'. It said this about 'Covid-19':

As of 19 March 2020, COVID-19 *is no longer considered to be a high consequence infectious diseases (HCID) in the UK* [my emphasis]. The 4 nations public health HCID group made an interim recommendation in January 2020 to classify COVID-19 as an HCID. This was based on consideration of the UK HCID criteria about the virus and the disease with information available during the early stages of the outbreak.

Now that more is known about COVID-19, the public health bodies in the UK have reviewed the most up to date information about COVID-19 against the UK HCID criteria. They have determined that several features have now changed; in particular, more information is available about mortality rates (low overall), and there is now greater clinical awareness and a specific and sensitive laboratory test, the availability of which continues to increase. The Advisory Committee on Dangerous Pathogens (ACDP) is also of the opinion that COVID-19 should no longer be classified as an HCID.

Soon after the government had been exposed for downgrading the risk they upgraded it again and everyone was back to singing from the same Cult hymn book. Ferguson and his fellow Gates clones indicated that lockdowns and restrictions would have to continue until a Gates-funded vaccine was developed. Gates said the same because Ferguson and his like were repeating the Gates script which is the Cult script. 'Flatten the curve' became an ongoing nightmare of continuing lockdowns with periods in between of severe restrictions in pursuit of destroying independent incomes and had nothing to do with protecting health about which the Cult gives not a shit. Why wouldn't Ferguson be pushing a vaccine 'solution' when he's owned by vaccine-obsessive Gates who makes a fortune from them and

when Ferguson heads the Vaccine Impact Modelling Consortium at Imperial College funded by the Gates Foundation and GAVI, the 'vaccine alliance', created by Gates as his personal vaccine promotion operation? To compound the human catastrophe that Ferguson's 'models' did so much to create he was later exposed for breaking his own lockdown rules by having sexual liaisons with his married girlfriend Antonia Staats at his home while she was living at another location with her husband and children. Staats was a 'climate' activist and senior campaigner at the Soros-funded Avaaz which I wouldn't trust to tell me that grass is green. Ferguson had to resign as a government advisor over this hypocrisy in May, 2020, but after a period of quiet he was back being quoted by the ridiculous media on the need for more lockdowns and a vaccine rollout. Other government-advising 'scientists' from Imperial College' held the fort in his absence and said lockdown could be indefinite until a vaccine was found. The Cult script was being sung by the payrolled choir. I said there was no intention of going back to 'normal' when the 'vaccine' came because the 'vaccine' is part of a very different agenda that I will discuss in Human 2.0. Why would the Cult want to let the world go back to normal when destroying that normal forever was the whole point of what was happening? House arrest, closing businesses and schools through lockdown, (un)social distancing and masks all followed the Ferguson fantasy models. Again as I predicted (these people are so predictable) when the 'vaccine' arrived we were told that house arrest, lockdown, (un)social distancing and masks would still have to continue. I will deal with the masks in the next chapter because they are of fundamental importance.

Where's the 'pandemic'?

Any mildly in-depth assessment of the figures revealed what was really going on. Cult-funded and controlled organisations still have genuine people working within them such is the number involved. So it is with Genevieve Briand, assistant program director of the Applied Economics master's degree program at Johns Hopkins

University. She analysed the impact that 'Covid-19' had on deaths from *all* causes in the United States using official data from the CDC for the period from early February to early September, 2020. She found that allegedly 'Covid' *related*-deaths exceeded those from heart disease which she found strange with heart disease always the biggest cause of fatalities. Her research became even more significant when she noted the sudden decline in 2020 of *all* non-'Covid' deaths: 'This trend is completely contrary to the pattern observed in all previous years … the total decrease in deaths by other causes almost exactly equals the increase in deaths by Covid-19.' This was such a game, set and match in terms of what was happening that Johns Hopkins University deleted the article on the grounds that it 'was being used to support false and dangerous inaccuracies about the impact of the pandemic'. No – because it exposed the scam from official CDC figures and this was confirmed when those figures were published in January, 2021. Here we can see the effect of people dying from heart attacks, cancer, road accidents and gunshot wounds – *anything* – having 'Covid-19' on the death certificate along with those diagnosed from 'symptoms' who had even not tested positive with a test not testing for the 'virus'. I am not kidding with the gunshot wounds, by the way. Brenda Bock, coroner in Grand County, Colorado, revealed that two gunshot victims tested positive for the 'virus' within the previous 30 days and were therefore classified as 'Covid deaths'. Bock said: 'These two people had tested positive for Covid, but that's not what killed them. A gunshot wound is what killed them.' She said she had not even finished her investigation when the state listed the gunshot victims as deaths due to the 'virus'. The death and case figures for 'Covid-19' are an absolute joke and yet they are repeated like parrots by the media, politicians and alleged medical 'experts'. The official Cult narrative is the only show in town.

Genevieve Briand found that deaths from all causes were not exceptional in 2020 compared with previous years and a Spanish magazine published figures that said the same about Spain which was a 'Covid' propaganda hotspot at one point. *Discovery Salud*, a

health and medicine magazine, quoted government figures which showed how 17,000 *fewer* people died in Spain in 2020 than in 2019 and more than 26,000 fewer than in 2018. The age-standardised mortality rate for England and Wales when age distribution is taken into account was significantly lower in 2020 than the 1970s, 80s and 90s, and was only the ninth highest since 2000. Where is the 'pandemic'?

Post mortems and autopsies virtually disappeared for 'Covid' deaths amid claims that 'virus-infected' bodily fluids posed a risk to those carrying out the autopsy. This was rejected by renowned German pathologist and forensic doctor Klaus Püschel who said that he and his staff had by then done 150 autopsies on 'Covid' patients with no problems at all. He said they were needed to know why some 'Covid' patients suffered blood clots and not severe respiratory infections. The 'virus' is, after all, called SARS or 'severe acute respiratory syndrome'. I highlighted in the spring of 2020 this phenomenon and quoted New York intensive care doctor Cameron Kyle-Sidell who posted a soon deleted YouTube video to say that they had been told to prepare to treat an infectious disease called 'Covid-19', but that was not what they were dealing with. Instead he likened the lung condition of the most severely ill patients to what you would expect with cabin depressurisation in a plane at 30,000 feet or someone dropped on the top of Everest without oxygen or acclimatisation. I have never said this is not happening to a small minority of alleged 'Covid' patients – I am saying this is not caused by a phantom 'contagious virus'. Indeed Kyle-Sidell said that 'Covid-19' was not the disease they were told was coming their way. 'We are operating under a medical paradigm that is untrue,' he said, and he believed they were treating the wrong disease: 'These people are being slowly starved of oxygen.' Patients would take off their oxygen masks in a state of fear and stress and while they were blue in the face on the brink of death. They did not look like patients dying of pneumonia. You can see why they don't want autopsies when their virus doesn't exist and there is another condition in some people that they don't wish to be uncovered. I should add here that

the 5G system of millimetre waves was being rapidly introduced around the world in 2020 and even more so now as they fire 5G at the Earth from satellites. At 60 gigahertz within the 5G range that frequency interacts with the oxygen molecule and stops people breathing in sufficient oxygen to be absorbed into the bloodstream. They are installing 5G in schools and hospitals. The world is not mad or anything. 5G can cause major changes to the lungs and blood as I detail in *The Answer* and these consequences are labelled 'Covid-19', the alleged symptoms of which can be caused by 5G and other electromagnetic frequencies as cells respond to radiation poisoning.

The 'Covid death' scam

Dr Scott Jensen, a Minnesota state senator and medical doctor, exposed 'Covid' Medicare payment incentives to hospitals and death certificate manipulation. He said he was sent a seven-page document by the US Department of Health 'coaching' him on how to fill out death certificates which had never happened before. The document said that he didn't need to have a laboratory test for 'Covid-19' to put that on the death certificate and that shocked him when death certificates are supposed to be about facts. Jensen described how doctors had been 'encouraged, if not pressured' to make a diagnosis of 'Covid-19' if they thought it was probable or *'presumed*'. No positive test was necessary – not that this would have mattered anyway. He said doctors were told to diagnose 'Covid' by symptoms when these were the same as colds, allergies, other respiratory problems, and certainly with influenza which 'disappeared' in the 'Covid' era. A common sniffle was enough to get the dreaded verdict. Ontario authorities decreed that a single care home resident with *one* symptom from a long list must lead to the isolation of the entire home. Other courageous doctors like Jensen made the same point about death figure manipulation and how deaths by other causes were falling while 'Covid-19 deaths' were rising at the same rate due to re-diagnosis. Their videos rarely survive long on YouTube with its Cult-supporting algorithms courtesy of CEO Susan Wojcicki and her bosses at Google. Figure-tampering was so glaring

and ubiquitous that even officials were letting it slip or outright saying it. UK chief scientific adviser Patrick Vallance said on one occasion that 'Covid' on the death certificate doesn't mean 'Covid' was the cause of death (so why the hell is it there?) and we had the rare sight of a BBC reporter telling the truth when she said: 'Someone could be successfully treated for Covid, in say April, discharged, and then in June, get run over by a bus and die … That person would still be counted as a Covid death in England.' Yet the BBC and the rest of the world media went on repeating the case and death figures as if they were real. Illinois Public Health Director Dr Ngozi Ezike revealed the deceit while her bosses must have been clenching their buttocks:

> If you were in a hospice and given a few weeks to live and you were then found to have Covid that would be counted as a Covid death. [There might be] a clear alternate cause, but it is still listed as a Covid death. So everyone listed as a Covid death doesn't mean that was the cause of the death, but that they had Covid at the time of death.

Yes, a 'Covid virus' never shown to exist and tested for with a test not testing for the 'virus'. In the first period of the pandemic hoax through the spring of 2020 the process began of designating almost everything a 'Covid' death and this has continued ever since. I sat in a restaurant one night listening to a loud conversation on the next table where a family was discussing in bewilderment how a relative who had no symptoms of 'Covid', and had died of a long-term problem, could have been diagnosed a death by the 'virus'. I could understand their bewilderment. If they read this book they will know why this medical fraud has been perpetrated the world over.

Some media truth shock

The media ignored the evidence of death certificate fraud until eventually one columnist did speak out when she saw it first-hand. Bel Mooney is a long-time national newspaper journalist in Britain currently working for the *Daily Mail*. Her article on February 19th, 2021, carried this headline: 'My dad Ted passed three Covid tests

and died of a chronic illness yet he's officially one of Britain's 120,000 victims of the virus and is far from alone ... so how many more are there?' She told how her 99-year-old father was in a care home with a long-standing chronic obstructive pulmonary disease and vascular dementia. Maybe, but he was still aware enough to tell her from the start that there was no 'virus' and he refused the 'vaccine' for that reason. His death was not unexpected given his chronic health problems and Mooney said she was shocked to find that 'Covid-19' was declared the cause of death on his death certificate. She said this was a 'bizarre and unacceptable untruth' for a man with long-time health problems who had tested negative twice at the home for the 'virus'. I was also shocked by this story although not by what she said. I had been highlighting the death certificate manipulation for ten months. It was the confirmation that a professional full-time journalist only realised this was going on when it affected her directly and neither did she know that whether her dad tested positive or negative was irrelevant with the test not testing for the 'virus'. Where had she been? She said she did not believe in 'conspiracy theories' without knowing I'm sure that this and 'conspiracy theorists' were terms put into widespread circulation by the CIA in the 1960s to discredit those who did not accept the ridiculous official story of the Kennedy assassination. A blanket statement of 'I don't believe in conspiracy theories' is always bizarre. The dictionary definition of the term alone means the world is drowning in conspiracies. What she said was even more daft when her dad had just been affected by the 'Covid' conspiracy. Why else does she think that 'Covid-19' was going on the death certificates of people who died of something else?

To be fair once she saw from personal experience what was happening she didn't mince words. Mooney was called by the care home on the morning of February 9th to be told her father had died in his sleep. When she asked for the official cause of death what came back was 'Covid-19'. Mooney challenged this and was told there had been deaths from Covid on the dementia floor (confirmed by a test not testing for the 'virus') so they considered it 'reasonable

to assume'. 'But doctor,' Mooney rightly protested, 'an assumption isn't a diagnosis.' She said she didn't blame the perfectly decent and sympathetic doctor – 'he was just doing his job'. Sorry, but that's *bullshit*. He wasn't doing his job at all. He was putting a false cause of death on the death certificate and that is a criminal offence for which he should be brought to account and the same with the millions of doctors worldwide who have done the same. They were not doing their job they were following orders and that must not wash at new Nuremberg trials any more than it did at the first ones. Mooney's doctor was 'assuming' (presuming) as he was told to, but 'just following orders' makes no difference to his actions. A doctor's job is to serve the patient and the truth, not follow orders, but that's what they have done all over the world and played a central part in making the 'Covid' hoax possible with all its catastrophic consequences for humanity. Shame on them and they must answer for their actions. Mooney said her disquiet worsened when she registered her father's death by telephone and was told by the registrar there had been very many other cases like hers where 'the deceased' had not tested positive for 'Covid' yet it was recorded as the cause of death. The test may not matter, but those involved at their level *think* it matters and it shows a callous disregard for accurate diagnosis. The pressure to do this is coming from the top of the national 'health' pyramids which in turn obey the World Health Organization which obeys Gates and the Cult. Mooney said the registrar agreed that this must distort the national figures adding that 'the strangest thing is that every winter we record countless deaths from flu, and this winter there have been none. Not one!' She asked if the registrar thought deaths from flu were being misdiagnosed and lumped together with 'Covid' deaths. The answer was a 'puzzled yes'. Mooney said that the funeral director said the same about 'Covid' deaths which had nothing to do with 'Covid'. They had lost count of the number of families upset by this and other funeral companies in different countries have had the same experience. Mooney wrote:

The nightly shroud-waving and shocking close-ups of pain imposed on us by the TV news bewildered and terrified the population into eager compliance with lockdowns. We were invited to 'save the NHS' and to grieve for strangers – the real-life loved ones behind those shocking death counts. Why would the public imagine what I now fear, namely that the way Covid-19 death statistics are compiled might make the numbers seem greater than they are?

Oh, just a little bit – like 100 percent.

Do the maths

Mooney asked why a country would wish to skew its mortality figures by wrongly certifying deaths? What had been going on? Well, if you don't believe in conspiracies you will never find the answer which is that *it's a conspiracy*. She did, however, describe what she had discovered as a 'national scandal'. In reality it's a global scandal and happening everywhere. Pillars of this conspiracy were all put into place before the button was pressed with the Drosten PCR protocol and high amplifications to produce the cases and death certificate changes to secure illusory 'Covid' deaths. Mooney notes that normally two doctors were needed to certify a death, with one having to know the patient, and how the rules were changed in the spring of 2020 to allow one doctor to do this. In the same period 'Covid deaths' were decreed to be all cases where Covid-19 was put on the death certificate even without a positive test or any symptoms. Mooney asked: 'How many of the 30,851 (as of January 15) care home resident deaths with Covid-19 on the certificate (32.4 per cent of all deaths so far) were based on an assumption, like that of my father? And what has that done to our national psyche?'All of them is the answer to the first question and it has devastated and dismantled the national psyche, actually the global psyche, on a colossal scale. In the UK case and death data is compiled by organisations like Public Health England (PHE) and the Office for National Statistics (ONS). Mooney highlights the insane policy of counting a death from any cause as 'Covid-19' if this happens within 28 days of a positive test (with a test not testing for the 'virus') and she points out that ONS statistics reflect deaths 'involving Covid' 'or due to Covid' which meant in practice any

death where 'Covid-19' was mentioned on the death certificate. She described the consequences of this fraud:

Most people will accept the narrative they are fed, so panicky governments here and in Europe witnessed the harsh measures enacted in totalitarian China and jumped into lockdown. Headlines about Covid deaths tolled like the knell that would bring doomsday to us all. Fear stalked our empty streets. Politicians parroted the frankly ridiculous aim of 'zero Covid' and shut down the economy, while most British people agreed that lockdown was essential and (astonishingly to me, as a patriotic Brit) even wanted more restrictions.

For what? Lies on death certificates? Never mind the grim toll of lives ruined, suicides, schools closed, rising inequality, depression, cancelled hospital treatments, cancer patients in a torture of waiting, poverty, economic devastation, loneliness, families kept apart, and so on. How many lives have been lost as a direct result of lockdown?

She said that we could join in a national chorus of shock and horror at reaching the 120,000 death toll which was surely certain to have been totally skewed all along, but what about the human cost of lockdown justified by these 'death figures'? *The British Medical Journal* had reported a 1,493 percent increase in cases of children taken to Great Ormond Street Hospital with abusive head injuries alone and then there was the effect on families:

Perhaps the most shocking thing about all this is that families have been kept apart – and obeyed the most irrational, changing rules at the whim of government – because they believed in the statistics. They succumbed to fear, which his generation rejected in that war fought for freedom. Dad (God rest his soul) would be angry. And so am I.

Another theme to watch is that in the winter months when there are more deaths from all causes they focus on 'Covid' deaths and in the summer when the British Lung Foundation says respiratory disease plummets by 80 percent they rage on about 'cases'. Either way fascism on population is always the answer.

Nazi eugenics in the 21st century

Elderly people in care homes have been isolated from their families month after lonely month with no contact with relatives and grandchildren who were banned from seeing them. We were told

that lockdown fascism was to 'protect the vulnerable' like elderly people. At the same time Do Not Resuscitate (DNR) orders were placed on their medical files so that if they needed resuscitation it wasn't done and 'Covid-19' went on their death certificates. Old people were not being 'protected' they were being culled – murdered in truth. DNR orders were being decreed for disabled and young people with learning difficulties or psychological problems. The UK Care Quality Commission, a non-departmental body of the Department of Health and Social Care, found that 34 percent of those working in health and social care were pressured into placing 'do not attempt cardiopulmonary resuscitation' orders on 'Covid' patients who suffered from disabilities and learning difficulties without involving the patient or their families in the decision. UK judges ruled that an elderly woman with dementia should have the DNA-manipulating 'Covid vaccine' against her son's wishes and that a man with severe learning difficulties should have the jab despite his family's objections. Never mind that many had already died. The judiciary always supports doctors and government in fascist dictatorships. They wouldn't dare do otherwise. A horrific video was posted showing fascist officers from Los Angeles police forcibly giving the 'Covid' shot to women with special needs who were screaming that they didn't want it. The same fascists are seen giving the jab to a sleeping elderly woman in a care home. This is straight out of the Nazi playbook. Hitler's Nazis committed mass murder of the mentally ill and physically disabled throughout Germany and occupied territories in the programme that became known as Aktion T4, or just T4. Sabbatian-controlled Hitler and his grotesque crazies set out to kill those they considered useless and unnecessary. The Reich Committee for the Scientific Registering of Hereditary and Congenital Illnesses registered the births of babies identified by physicians to have 'defects'. By 1941 alone more than 5,000 children were murdered by the state and it is estimated that in total the number of innocent people killed in Aktion T4 was between 275,000 and 300,000. Parents were told their children had been sent away for 'special treatment' never to return. It is rather pathetic to see claims about plans for new extermination camps being dismissed today

when the same force behind current events did precisely that 80 years ago. Margaret Sanger was a Cult operative who used 'birth control' to sanitise her programme of eugenics. Organisations she founded became what is now Planned Parenthood. Sanger proposed that 'the whole dysgenic population would have its choice of segregation or sterilization'. These included epileptics, 'feeble-minded', and prostitutes. Sanger opposed charity because it perpetuated 'human waste'. She reveals the Cult mentality and if anyone thinks that extermination camps are a 'conspiracy theory' their naivety is touching if breathtakingly stupid.

If you don't believe that doctors can act with callous disregard for their patients it is worth considering that doctors and medical staff agreed to put government-decreed DNR orders on medical files and do nothing when resuscitation is called for. I don't know what you call such people in your house. In mine they are Nazis from the Josef Mengele School of Medicine. Phenomenal numbers of old people have died worldwide from the effects of lockdown, depression, lack of treatment, the 'vaccine' (more later) and losing the will to live. A common response at the start of the manufactured pandemic was to remove old people from hospital beds and transfer them to nursing homes. The decision would result in a mass cull of elderly people in those homes through lack of treatment – *not* 'Covid'. Care home whistleblowers have told how once the 'Covid' era began doctors would not come to their homes to treat patients and they were begging for drugs like antibiotics that often never came. The most infamous example was ordered by New York governor Andrew Cuomo, brother of a moronic CNN host, who amazingly was given an Emmy Award for his handling of the 'Covid crisis' by the ridiculous Wokers that hand them out. Just how ridiculous could be seen in February, 2021, when a Department of Justice and FBI investigation began into how thousands of old people in New York died in nursing homes after being discharged from hospital to make way for 'Covid' patients on Cuomo's say-so – and how he and his staff covered up these facts. This couldn't have happened to a nicer psychopath. Even then there was a 'Covid' spin. Reports said that

thousands of old people who tested positive for 'Covid' in hospital were transferred to nursing homes to both die of 'Covid' and transmit it to others. No – they were in hospital because they were ill and the fact that they tested positive with a test not testing for the 'virus' is irrelevant. They were ill often with respiratory diseases ubiquitous in old people near the end of their lives. Their transfer out of hospital meant that their treatment stopped and many would go on to die.

They're old. Who gives a damn?

I have exposed in the books for decades the Cult plan to cull the world's old people and even to introduce at some point what they call a 'demise pill' which at a certain age everyone would take and be out of here by law. In March, 2021, Spain legalised euthanasia and assisted suicide following the Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg and Canada on the Tiptoe to the demise pill. Treatment of old people by many 'care' homes has been a disgrace in the 'Covid' era. There are many, many, caring staff – I know some. There have, however, been legions of stories about callous treatment of old people and their families. Police were called when families came to take their loved ones home in the light of isolation that was killing them. They became prisoners of the state. Care home residents in insane, fascist Ontario, Canada, were not allowed to leave their *room* once the 'Covid' hoax began. UK staff have even wheeled elderly people away from windows where family members were talking with them. Oriana Criscuolo from Stockport in the English North West dropped off some things for her 80-year-old father who has Parkinson's disease and dementia and she wanted to wave to him through a ground-floor window. She was told that was 'illegal'. When she went anyway they closed the curtains in the middle of the day. Oriana said:

> It's just unbelievable. I cannot understand how care home staff – people who are being paid to care – have become so uncaring. Their behaviour is inhumane and cruel. It's beyond belief.

She was right and this was not a one-off. What a way to end your life in such loveless circumstances. UK registered nurse Nicky Millen, a proper old school nurse for 40 years, said that when she started her career care was based on dignity, choice, compassion and empathy. Now she said 'the things that are important to me have gone out of the window.' She was appalled that people were dying without their loved ones and saying goodbye on iPads. Nicky described how a distressed 89-year-old lady stroked her face and asked her 'how many paracetamol would it take to finish me off'. Life was no longer worth living while not seeing her family. Nicky said she was humiliated in front of the ward staff and patients for letting the lady stroke her face and giving her a cuddle. Such is the dehumanisation that the 'Covid' hoax has brought to the surface. Nicky worked in care homes where patients told her they were being held prisoner. 'I want to live until I die', one said to her. 'I had a lady in tears because she hadn't seen her great-grandson.' Nicky was compassionate old school meeting psychopathic New Normal. She also said she had worked on a 'Covid' ward with no 'Covid' patients. Jewish writer Shai Held wrote an article in March, 2020, which was headlined 'The Staggering, Heartless Cruelty Toward the Elderly'. What he described was happening from the earliest days of lockdown. He said 'the elderly' were considered a group and not unique individuals (the way of the Woke). Shai Held said:

Notice how the all-too-familiar rhetoric of dehumanization works: 'The elderly' are bunched together as a faceless mass, all of them considered culprits and thus effectively deserving of the suffering the pandemic will inflict upon them. Lost entirely is the fact that the elderly are individual human beings, each with a distinctive face and voice, each with hopes and dreams, memories and regrets, friendships and marriages, loves lost and loves sustained.

'The elderly' have become another dehumanised group for which anything goes and for many that has resulted in cold disregard for their rights and their life. The distinctive face that Held talks about is designed to be deleted by masks until everyone is part of a faceless mass.

‘War-zone’ hospitals myth

Again and again medical professionals have told me what was really going on and how hospitals ‘overrun like war zones’ according to the media were virtually empty. The mantra from medical whistleblowers was please don’t use my name or my career is over. Citizen journalists around the world sneaked into hospitals to film evidence exposing the ‘war-zone’ lie. They really *were* largely empty with closed wards and operating theatres. I met a hospital worker in my town on the Isle of Wight during the first lockdown in 2020 who said the only island hospital had never been so quiet. Lockdown was justified by the psychopaths to stop hospitals being overrun. At the same time that the island hospital was near-empty the military arrived here to provide *extra beds*. It was all propaganda to ramp up the fear to ensure compliance with fascism as were never-used temporary hospitals with thousands of beds known as Nightingales and never-used make-shift mortuaries opened by the criminal UK government. A man who helped to install those extra island beds attributed to the army said they were never used and the hospital was empty. Doctors and nurses ‘stood around talking or on their phones, wandering down to us to see what we were doing’. There were no masks or social distancing. He accused the useless local island paper, the *County Press*, of ‘pumping the fear as if our hospital was overrun and we only have one so it should have been’. He described ambulances parked up with crews outside in deck chairs. When his brother called an ambulance he was told there was a two-hour backlog which he called ‘bullshit’. An old lady on the island fell ‘and was in a bad way’, but a caller who rang for an ambulance was told the situation wasn’t urgent enough. Ambulance stations were working under capacity while people would hear ambulances with sirens blaring driving through the streets. When those living near the stations realised what was going on they would follow them as they left, circulated around an urban area with the sirens going, and then came back without stopping. All this was to increase levels of fear and the same goes for the ‘ventilator shortage crisis’ that cost tens of millions for hastily produced ventilators never to be used.

Ambulance crews that agreed to be exploited in this way for fear propaganda might find themselves a mirror. I wish them well with that. Empty hospitals were the obvious consequence of treatment and diagnoses of non-'Covid' conditions cancelled and those involved handed a death sentence. People have been dying at home from undiagnosed and untreated cancer, heart disease and other life-threatening conditions to allow empty hospitals to deal with a 'pandemic' that wasn't happening.

Death of the innocent

'War-zones' have been laying off nursing staff, even doctors where they can. There was no work for them. Lockdown was justified by saving lives and protecting the vulnerable they were actually killing with DNR orders and preventing empty hospitals being 'overrun'. In Britain the mantra of stay at home to 'save the NHS' was everywhere and across the world the same story was being sold when it was all lies. Two California doctors, Dan Erickson and Artin Massihi at Accelerated Urgent Care in Bakersfield, held a news conference in April, 2020, to say that intensive care units in California were 'empty, essentially', with hospitals shutting floors, not treating patients and laying off doctors. The California health system was working at minimum capacity 'getting rid of doctors because we just don't have the volume'. They said that people with conditions such as heart disease and cancer were not coming to hospital out of fear of 'Covid-19'. Their video was deleted by Susan Wojcicki's Cult-owned YouTube after reaching five million views. Florida governor Ron Desantis, who rejected the severe lockdowns of other states and is being targeted for doing so, said that in March, 2020, every US governor was given models claiming they would run out of hospital beds in days. That was never going to happen and the 'modellers' knew it. Deceit can be found at every level of the system. Urgent children's operations were cancelled including fracture repairs and biopsies to spot cancer. Eric Nicholls, a consultant paediatrician, said 'this is obviously concerning and we need to return to normal operating and to increase capacity as soon as possible'. Psychopaths

in power were rather less concerned *because* they are psychopaths. Deletion of urgent care and diagnosis has been happening all over the world and how many kids and others have died as a result of the actions of these cold and heartless lunatics dictating 'health' policy? The number must be stratospheric. Richard Sullivan, professor of cancer and global health at King's College London, said people feared 'Covid' more than cancer such was the campaign of fear. 'Years of lost life will be quite dramatic', Sullivan said, with 'a huge amount of avoidable mortality'. Sarah Woolnough, executive director for policy at Cancer Research UK, said there had been a 75 percent drop in urgent referrals to hospitals by family doctors of people with suspected cancer. Sullivan said that 'a lot of services have had to scale back – we've seen a dramatic decrease in the amount of elective cancer surgery'. Lockdown deaths worldwide has been absolutely fantastic with the *New York Post* reporting how data confirmed that 'lockdowns end more lives than they save':

> There was a sharp decline in visits to emergency rooms and an increase in fatal heart attacks because patients didn't receive prompt treatment. Many fewer people were screened for cancer. Social isolation contributed to excess deaths from dementia and Alzheimer's.
>
> Researchers predicted that the social and economic upheaval would lead to tens of thousands of "deaths of despair" from drug overdoses, alcoholism and suicide. As unemployment surged and mental-health and substance-abuse treatment programs were interrupted, the reported levels of anxiety, depression and suicidal thoughts increased dramatically, as did alcohol sales and fatal drug overdoses.

This has been happening while nurses and other staff had so much time on their hands in the 'war-zones' that Tic-Tok dancing videos began appearing across the Internet with medical staff dancing around in empty wards and corridors as people died at home from causes that would normally have been treated in hospital.

Mentions in dispatches

One brave and truth-committed whistleblower was Louise Hampton, a call handler with the UK NHS who made a viral Internet video saying she had done 'fuck all' during the 'pandemic'

which was 'a load of bollocks'. She said that 'Covid-19' was rebranded flu and of course she lost her job. This is what happens in the medical and endless other professions now when you tell the truth. Louise filmed inside 'war-zone' accident and emergency departments to show they were empty and I mean *empty* as in no one there. The mainstream media could have done the same and blown the gaff on the whole conspiracy. They haven't to their eternal shame. Not that most 'journalists' seem capable of manifesting shame as with the psychopaths they slavishly repeat without question. The relative few who were admitted with serious health problems were left to die alone with no loved ones allowed to see them because of 'Covid' rules and they included kids dying without the comfort of mum and dad at their bedside while the evil behind this couldn't give a damn. It was all good fun to them. A Scottish NHS staff nurse publicly quit in the spring of 2021 saying: 'I can no longer be part of the lies and the corruption by the government.' She said hospitals 'aren't full, the beds aren't full, beds have been shut, wards have been shut'. Hospitals were never busy throughout 'Covid'. The staff nurse said that Nicola Sturgeon, tragically the leader of the Scottish government, was on television saying save the hospitals and the NHS – 'but the beds are empty' and 'we've not seen flu, we always see flu every year'. She wrote to government and spoke with her union Unison (the unions are Cult-compromised and *useless*, but nothing changed. Many of her colleagues were scared of losing their jobs if they spoke out as they wanted to. She said nursing staff were being affected by wearing masks all day and 'my head is splitting every shift from wearing a mask'. The NHS is part of the fascist tyranny and must be dismantled so we can start again with human beings in charge. (Ironically, hospitals were reported to be busier again when official 'Covid' cases *fell* in spring/summer of 2021 and many other conditions required treatment at the same time as *the fake vaccine rollout*.)

I will cover the 'Covid vaccine' scam in detail later, but it is another indicator of the sickening disregard for human life that I am highlighting here. The DNA-manipulating concoctions do not fulfil

the definition of a 'vaccine', have never been used on humans before and were given only emergency approval because trials were not completed and they continued using the unknowing public. The result was what a NHS senior nurse with responsibility for 'vaccine' procedure said was 'genocide'. She said the 'vaccines' were not 'vaccines'. They had not been shown to be safe and claims about their effectiveness by drug companies were 'poetic licence'. She described what was happening as a 'horrid act of human annihilation'. The nurse said that management had instigated a policy of not providing a Patient Information Leaflet (PIL) before people were 'vaccinated' even though health care professionals are supposed to do this according to protocol. Patients should also be told that they are taking part in an ongoing clinical trial. Her challenges to what is happening had seen her excluded from meetings and ridiculed in others. She said she was told to 'watch my step … or I would find myself surplus to requirements'. The nurse, who spoke anonymously in fear of her career, said she asked her NHS manager why he/she was content with taking part in genocide against those having the 'vaccines'. The reply was that everyone had to play their part and to 'put up, shut up, and get it done'. Government was 'leaning heavily' on NHS management which was clearly leaning heavily on staff. This is how the global 'medical' hierarchy operates and it starts with the Cult and its World Health Organization.

She told the story of a doctor who had the Pfizer jab and when questioned had no idea what was in it. The doctor had never read the literature. We have to stop treating doctors as intellectual giants when so many are moral and medical pygmies. The doctor did not even know that the 'vaccines' were not fully approved or that their trials were ongoing. They were, however, asking their patients if they minded taking part in follow-ups for research purposes – yes, the *ongoing clinical trial*. The nurse said the doctor's ignorance was not rare and she had spoken to a hospital consultant who had the jab without any idea of the background or that the 'trials' had not been completed. Nurses and pharmacists had shown the same ignorance.

'My NHS colleagues have forsaken their duty of care, broken their code of conduct – Hippocratic Oath – and have been brainwashed just the same as the majority of the UK public through propaganda …' She said she had not been able to recruit a single NHS colleague, doctor, nurse or pharmacist to stand with her and speak out. Her union had refused to help. She said that if the genocide came to light she would not hesitate to give evidence at a Nuremberg-type trial against those in power who could have affected the outcomes but didn't.

And all for what?

To put the nonsense into perspective let's say the 'virus' does exist and let's go completely crazy and accept that the official manipulated figures for cases and deaths are accurate. *Even then* a study by Stanford University epidemiologist Dr John Ioannidis published on the World Health Organization website produced an average infection to fatality rate of … *0.23 percent!* Ioannidis said: 'If one could sample equally from all locations globally, the median infection fatality rate might even be substantially lower than the 0.23% observed in my analysis.' For healthy people under 70 it was … *0.05 percent*! This compares with the 3.4 percent claimed by the Cult-owned World Health Organization when the hoax was first played and maximum fear needed to be generated. An updated Stanford study in April, 2021, put the 'infection' to 'fatality' rate at just 0.15 percent. Another team of scientists led by Megan O'Driscoll and Henrik Salje studied data from 45 countries and published their findings on the Nature website. For children and young people the figure is so small it virtually does not register although authorities will be hyping dangers to the young when they introduce DNA-manipulating 'vaccines' for children. The O'Driscoll study produced an average infection-fatality figure of 0.003 for children from birth to four; 0.001 for 5 to 14; 0.003 for 15 to 19; and it was still only 0.456 up to 64. To claim that children must be 'vaccinated' to protect them from 'Covid' is an obvious lie and so there must be another reason and there is. What's more the average age of a 'Covid' death is akin

to the average age that people die in general. The average age of death in England is about 80 for men and 83 for women. The average age of death from alleged 'Covid' is between 82 and 83. California doctors, Dan Erickson and Artin Massihi, said at their April media conference that projection models of millions of deaths had been 'woefully inaccurate'. They produced detailed figures showing that Californians had a 0.03 chance of dying from 'Covid' based on the number of people who tested positive (with a test not testing for the 'virus'). Erickson said there was a 0.1 percent chance of dying from 'Covid' in the *state* of New York, not just the city, and a 0.05 percent chance in Spain, a centre of 'Covid-19' hysteria at one stage. The Stanford studies supported the doctors' data with fatality rate estimates of 0.23 and 0.15 percent. How close are these figures to my estimate of *zero*? Death-rate figures claimed by the World Health Organization at the start of the hoax were some 15 times higher. The California doctors said there was no justification for lockdowns and the economic devastation they caused. Everything they had ever learned about quarantine was that you quarantine the *sick* and not the healthy. They had never seen this before and it made no medical sense.

Why in the in the light of all this would governments and medical systems the world over say that billions must go under house arrest; lose their livelihood; in many cases lose their mind, their health and their life; force people to wear masks dangerous to health and psychology; make human interaction and even family interaction a criminal offence; ban travel; close restaurants, bars, watching live sport, concerts, theatre, and any activity involving human togetherness and discourse; and closing schools to isolate children from their friends and cause many to commit suicide in acts of hopelessness and despair? The California doctors said lockdown consequences included increased child abuse, partner abuse, alcoholism, depression, and other impacts they were seeing every day. Who would do that to the entire human race if not mentally-ill psychopaths of almost unimaginable extremes like Bill Gates? We must face the reality of what we are dealing with and come out of

denial. Fascism and tyranny are made possible only by the target population submitting and acquiescing to fascism and tyranny. The whole of human history shows that to be true. Most people naively and unquestioning believed what they were told about a 'deadly virus' and meekly and weakly submitted to house arrest. Those who didn't believe it – at least in total – still submitted in fear of the consequences of not doing so. For the rest who wouldn't submit draconian fines have been imposed, brutal policing by psychopaths *for* psychopaths, and condemnation from the meek and weak who condemn the Pushbackers on behalf of the very force that has them, too, in its gunsights. 'Pathetic' does not even begin to suffice. Britain's brainless 'Health' Secretary Matt Hancock warned anyone lying to border officials about returning from a list of 'hotspot' countries could face a jail sentence of up to ten years which is more than for racially-aggravated assault, incest and attempting to have sex with a child under 13. Hancock is a lunatic, but he has the state apparatus behind him in a Cult-led chain reaction and the same with UK 'Vaccine Minister' Nadhim Zahawi, a prominent member of the mega-Cult secret society, Le Cercle, which featured in my earlier books. The Cult enforces its will on governments and medical systems; government and medical systems enforce their will on business and police; business enforces its will on staff who enforce it on customers; police enforce the will of the Cult on the population and play their essential part in creating a world of fascist control that their own children and grandchildren will have to live in their entire lives. It is a hierarchical pyramid of imposition and acquiescence and, yes indeedy, of clinical insanity.

Does anyone bright enough to read this book have to ask what the answer is? I think not, but I will reveal it anyway in the fewest of syllables: Tell the psychos and their moronic lackeys to fuck off and let's get on with our lives. We are many – They are few.

CHAPTER SEVEN

War on your mind

One believes things because one has been conditioned to believe them
Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World*

I have described the 'Covid' hoax as a 'Psyop' and that is true in every sense and on every level in accordance with the definition of that term which is psychological warfare. Break down the 'Covid pandemic' to the foundation themes and it is psychological warfare on the human individual and collective mind.

The same can be said for the entire human belief system involving every subject you can imagine. Huxley was right in his contention that people believe what they are conditioned to believe and this comes from the repetition throughout their lives of the same falsehoods. They spew from government, corporations, media and endless streams of 'experts' telling you what the Cult wants you to believe and often believing it themselves (although *far* from always). 'Experts' are rewarded with 'prestigious' jobs and titles and as agents of perceptual programming with regular access to the media. The Cult has to control the narrative – control *information* – or they lose control of the vital, crucial, without-which-they-cannot-prevail public perception of reality. The foundation of that control today is the Internet made possible by the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA), the incredibly sinister technological arm of the Pentagon. The Internet is the result of military technology.

DARPA openly brags about establishing the Internet which has been a long-term project to lasso the minds of the global population. I have said for decades the plan is to control information to such an extreme that eventually no one would see or hear anything that the Cult does not approve. We are closing in on that end with ferocious censorship since the 'Covid' hoax began and in my case it started back in the 1990s in terms of books and speaking venues. I had to create my own publishing company in 1995 precisely because no one else would publish my books even then. I think they're all still running.

Cult Internet

To secure total control of information they needed the Internet in which pre-programmed algorithms can seek out 'unclean' content for deletion and even stop it being posted in the first place. The Cult had to dismantle print and non-Internet broadcast media to ensure the transfer of information to the appropriate-named 'Web' – a critical expression of the *Cult* web. We've seen the ever-quickening demise of traditional media and control of what is left by a tiny number of corporations operating worldwide. Independent journalism in the mainstream is already dead and never was that more obvious than since the turn of 2020. The Cult wants all information communicated via the Internet to globally censor and allow the plug to be pulled any time. Lockdowns and forced isolation has meant that communication between people has been through electronic means and no longer through face-to-face discourse and discussion. Cult psychopaths have targeted the bars, restaurants, sport, venues and meeting places in general for this reason. None of this is by chance and it's to stop people gathering in any kind of privacy or number while being able to track and monitor all Internet communications and block them as necessary. Even private messages between individuals have been censored by these fascists that control Cult fronts like Facebook, Twitter, Google and YouTube which are all officially run by Sabbatian place-people and from the background by higher-level Sabbatian place people.

Facebook, Google, Amazon and their like were seed-funded and supported into existence with money-no-object infusions of funds either directly or indirectly from DARPA and CIA technology arm In-Q-Tel. The Cult plays the long game and prepares very carefully for big plays like 'Covid'. Amazon is another front in the psychological war and pretty much controls the global market in book sales and increasingly publishing. Amazon's limitless funds have deleted fantastic numbers of independent publishers to seize global domination on the way to deciding which books can be sold and circulated and which cannot. Moves in that direction are already happening. Amazon's leading light Jeff Bezos is the grandson of Lawrence Preston Gise who worked with DARPA predecessor ARPA. Amazon has big connections to the CIA and the Pentagon. The plan I have long described went like this:

1. Employ military technology to establish the Internet.

2. Sell the Internet as a place where people can freely communicate without censorship and allow that to happen until the Net becomes the central and irreversible pillar of human society. If the Internet had been highly censored from the start many would have rejected it.

3. Fund and manipulate major corporations into being to control the circulation of information on your Internet using cover stories about geeks in garages to explain how they came about. Give them unlimited funds to expand rapidly with no need to make a profit for years while non-Cult companies who need to balance the books cannot compete. You know that in these circumstances your Googles, YouTubes, Facebooks and Amazons are going to secure near monopolies by either crushing or buying up the opposition.

4. Allow freedom of expression on both the Internet and communication platforms to draw people in until the Internet is the central and irreversible pillar of human society and your communication corporations have reached a stage of near monopoly domination.

5. Then unleash your always-planned frenzy of censorship on the basis of 'where else are you going to go?' and continue to expand that until nothing remains that the Cult does not want its human targets to see.

The process was timed to hit the 'Covid' hoax to ensure the best chance possible of controlling the narrative which they knew they had to do at all costs. They were, after all, about to unleash a 'deadly virus' that didn't really exist. If you do that in an environment of free-flowing information and opinion you would be dead in the

water before you could say Gates is a psychopath. The network was in place through which the Cult-created-and-owned World Health Organization could dictate the 'Covid' narrative and response policy slavishly supported by Cult-owned Internet communication giants and mainstream media while those telling a different story were censored. Google, YouTube, Facebook and Twitter openly announced that they would do this. What else would we expect from Cult-owned operations like Facebook which former executives have confirmed set out to make the platform more addictive than cigarettes and coldly manipulates emotions of its users to sow division between people and groups and scramble the minds of the young? If Zuckerberg lives out the rest of his life without going to jail for crimes against humanity, and most emphatically against the young, it will be a travesty of justice. Still, no matter, cause and effect will catch up with him eventually and the same with Sergey Brin and Larry Page at Google with its CEO Sundar Pichai who fix the Google search results to promote Cult narratives and hide the opposition. Put the same key words into Google and other search engines like DuckDuckGo and you will see how different results can be. Wikipedia is another intensely biased 'encyclopaedia' which skews its content to the Cult agenda. YouTube links to Wikipedia's version of 'Covid' and 'climate change' on video pages in which experts in their field offer a different opinion (even that is increasingly rare with Wojcicki censorship). Into this 'Covid' silence-them network must be added government media censors, sorry 'regulators', such as Ofcom in the UK which imposed tyrannical restrictions on British broadcasters that had the effect of banning me from ever appearing. Just to debate with me about my evidence and views on 'Covid' would mean breaking the fascistic impositions of Ofcom and its CEO career government bureaucrat Melanie Dawes. Gutless British broadcasters tremble at the very thought of fascist Ofcom.

Psychos behind 'Covid'

The reason for the 'Covid' catastrophe in all its facets and forms can be seen by whom and what is driving the policies worldwide in such a coordinated way. Decisions are not being made to protect health, but to target psychology. The dominant group guiding and 'advising' government policy are not medical professionals. They are psychologists and behavioural scientists. Every major country has its own version of this phenomenon and I'll use the British example to show how it works. In many ways the British version has been affecting the wider world in the form of the huge behaviour manipulation network in the UK which operates in other countries. The network involves private companies, government, intelligence and military. The Cabinet Office is at the centre of the government 'Covid' Psyop and part-owns, with 'innovation charity' Nesta, the Behavioural Insights Team (BIT) which claims to be independent of government but patently isn't. The BIT was established in 2010 and its job is to manipulate the psyche of the population to acquiesce to government demands and so much more. It is also known as the 'Nudge Unit', a name inspired by the 2009 book by two ultra-Zionists, Cass Sunstein and Richard Thaler, called *Nudge: Improving Decisions About Health, Wealth, and Happiness*. The book, as with the Behavioural Insights Team, seeks to 'nudge' behaviour (manipulate it) to make the public follow patterns of action and perception that suit those in authority (the Cult). Sunstein is so skilled at this that he advises the World Health Organization and the UK Behavioural Insights Team and was Administrator of the White House Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs in the Obama administration. Biden appointed him to the Department of Homeland Security – another ultra-Zionist in the fold to oversee new immigration laws which is another policy the Cult wants to control. Sunstein is desperate to silence anyone exposing conspiracies and co-authored a 2008 report on the subject in which suggestions were offered to ban 'conspiracy theorizing' or impose 'some kind of tax, financial or otherwise, on those who disseminate such theories'. I guess a psychiatrist's chair is out of the question?

Sunstein's mate Richard Thaler, an 'academic affiliate' of the UK Behavioural Insights Team, is a proponent of 'behavioural economics' which is defined as the study of 'the effects of psychological, cognitive, emotional, cultural and social factors on the decisions of individuals and institutions'. Study the effects so they can be manipulated to be what you want them to be. Other leading names in the development of behavioural economics are ultra-Zionists Daniel Kahneman and Robert J. Shiller and they, with Thaler, won the Nobel Memorial Prize in Economic Sciences for their work in this field. The Behavioural Insights Team is operating at the heart of the UK government and has expanded globally through partnerships with several universities including Harvard, Oxford, Cambridge, University College London (UCL) and Pennsylvania. They claim to have 'trained' (reframed) 20,000 civil servants and run more than 750 projects involving 400 randomised controlled trials in dozens of countries' as another version of mind reframers Common Purpose. BIT works from its office in New York with cities and their agencies, as well as other partners, across the United States and Canada – this is a company part-owned by the British government Cabinet Office. An executive order by President Cult-servant Obama established a US Social and Behavioral Sciences Team in 2015. They all have the same reason for being and that's to brainwash the population directly and by brainwashing those in positions of authority.

'Covid' mind game

Another prime aspect of the UK mind-control network is the 'independent' [joke] Scientific Pandemic Insights Group on Behaviours (SPI-B) which 'provides behavioural science advice aimed at anticipating and helping people adhere to interventions that are recommended by medical or epidemiological experts'. That means manipulating public perception and behaviour to do whatever government tells them to do. It's disgusting and if they really want the public to be 'safe' this lot should all be under lock and key. According to the government website SPI-B consists of

'behavioural scientists, health and social psychologists, anthropologists and historians' and advises the Whitty-Vallance-led Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE) which in turn advises the government on 'the science' (it doesn't) and 'Covid' policy. When politicians say they are being guided by 'the science' this is the rabble in each country they are talking about and that 'science' is dominated by behaviour manipulators to enforce government fascism through public compliance. The Behaviour Insight Team is headed by psychologist David Solomon Halpern, a visiting professor at King's College London, and connects with a national and global web of other civilian and military organisations as the Cult moves towards its goal of fusing them into one fascistic whole in every country through its 'Fusion Doctrine'. The behaviour manipulation network involves, but is not confined to, the Foreign Office; National Security Council; government communications headquarters (GCHQ); MI5; MI6; the Cabinet Office-based Media Monitoring Unit; and the Rapid Response Unit which 'monitors digital trends to spot emerging issues; including misinformation and disinformation; and identifies the best way to respond'.

There is also the 77th Brigade of the UK military which operates like the notorious Israeli military's Unit 8200 in manipulating information and discussion on the Internet by posing as members of the public to promote the narrative and discredit those who challenge it. Here we have the military seeking to manipulate *domestic* public opinion while the Nazis in government are fine with that. Conservative Member of Parliament Tobias Ellwood, an advocate of lockdown and control through 'vaccine passports', is a Lieutenant Colonel reservist in the 77th Brigade which connects with the military operation jHub, the 'innovation centre' for the Ministry of Defence and Strategic Command. jHub has also been involved with the civilian National Health Service (NHS) in 'symptom tracing' the population. The NHS is a key part of this mind control network and produced a document in December, 2020, explaining to staff how to use psychological manipulation with different groups and ages to get them to have the DNA-manipulating 'Covid vaccine'

that's designed to cumulatively rewrite human genetics. The document, called 'Optimising Vaccination Roll Out – Do's and Dont's for all messaging, documents and "communications" in the widest sense', was published by NHS England and the NHS Improvement *Behaviour Change Unit* in partnership with Public Health England and Warwick Business School. I hear the mantra about 'save the NHS' and 'protect the NHS' when we need to scrap the NHS and start again. The current version is far too corrupt, far too anti-human and totally compromised by Cult operatives and their assets. UK government broadcast media censor Ofcom will connect into this web – as will the BBC with its tremendous Ofcom influence – to control what the public see and hear and dictate mass perception. Nuremberg trials must include personnel from all these organisations.

The fear factor

The 'Covid' hoax has led to the creation of the UK Cabinet Office-connected Joint Biosecurity Centre (JBC) which is officially described as providing 'expert advice on pandemics' using its independent [all Cult operations are 'independent'] analytical function to provide real-time analysis about infection outbreaks to identify and respond to outbreaks of Covid-19'. Another role is to advise the government on a response to spikes in infections – 'for example by closing schools or workplaces in local areas where infection levels have risen'. Put another way, promoting the Cult agenda. The Joint Biosecurity Centre is modelled on the Joint Terrorism Analysis Centre which analyses intelligence to set 'terrorism threat levels' and here again you see the fusion of civilian and military operations and intelligence that has led to military intelligence producing documents about 'vaccine hesitancy' and how it can be combated. Domestic civilian matters and opinions should not be the business of the military. The Joint Biosecurity Centre is headed by Tom Hurd, director general of the Office for Security and Counter-Terrorism from the establishment-to-its-fingertips Hurd family. His father is former Foreign Secretary Douglas Hurd. How coincidental that Tom

Hurd went to the elite Eton College and Oxford University with Boris Johnson. Imperial College with its ridiculous computer modeller Neil Ferguson will connect with this gigantic web that will itself interconnect with similar set-ups in other major and not so major countries. Compared with this Cult network the politicians, be they Boris Johnson, Donald Trump or Joe Biden, are bit-part players 'following the science'. The network of psychologists was on the 'Covid' case from the start with the aim of generating maximum fear of the 'virus' to ensure compliance by the population. A government behavioural science group known as SPI-B produced a paper in March, 2020, for discussion by the main government science advisory group known as SAGE. It was headed 'Options for increasing adherence to social distancing measures' and it said the following in a section headed 'Persuasion':

- A substantial number of people still do not feel sufficiently personally threatened; it could be that they are reassured by the low death rate in their demographic group, although levels of concern may be rising. Having a good understanding of the risk has been found to be positively associated with adoption of COVID-19 social distancing measures in Hong Kong.

- The perceived level of personal threat needs to be increased among those who are complacent, using hard-hitting evaluation of options for increasing social distancing emotional messaging. To be effective this must also empower people by making clear the actions they can take to reduce the threat.

- Responsibility to others: There seems to be insufficient understanding of, or feelings of responsibility about, people's role in transmitting the infection to others … Messaging about actions need to be framed positively in terms of protecting oneself and the community, and increase confidence that they will be effective.

- Some people will be more persuaded by appeals to play by the rules, some by duty to the community, and some to personal risk.

> All these different approaches are needed. The messaging also needs to take account of the realities of different people's lives. Messaging needs to take account of the different motivational levers and circumstances of different people.

All this could be achieved the SPI-B psychologists said by *using the media to increase the sense of personal threat* which translates as terrify the shit out of the population, including children, so they all do what we want. That's not happened has it? Those excuses for 'journalists' who wouldn't know journalism if it bit them on the arse (the great majority) have played their crucial part in serving this Cult-government Psyop to enslave their own kids and grandkids. How they live with themselves I have no idea. The psychological war has been underpinned by constant government 'Covid' propaganda in almost every television and radio ad break, plus the Internet and print media, which has pounded out the fear with taxpayers footing the bill for their own programming. The result has been people terrified of a 'virus' that doesn't exist or one with a tiny fatality rate even if you believe it does. People walk down the street and around the shops wearing face-nappies damaging their health and psychology while others report those who refuse to be that naïve to the police who turn up in their own face-nappies. I had a cameraman come to my flat and he was so frightened of 'Covid' he came in wearing a mask and refused to shake my hand in case he caught something. He had – naïveitis – and the thought that he worked in the mainstream media was both depressing and made his behaviour perfectly explainable. The fear which has gripped the minds of so many and frozen them into compliance has been carefully cultivated by these psychologists who are really psychopaths. If lives get destroyed and a lot of young people commit suicide it shows our plan is working. SPI-B then turned to compulsion on the public to comply. 'With adequate preparation, rapid change can be achieved', it said. Some countries had introduced mandatory self-isolation on a wide scale without evidence of major public unrest and a large majority of the UK's population appeared to be supportive of more coercive measures with 64 percent of adults saying they would

support putting London under a lockdown (watch the 'polls' which are designed to make people believe that public opinion is in favour or against whatever the subject in hand).

For 'aggressive protective measures' to be effective, the SPI-B paper said, special attention should be devoted to those population groups that are more at risk. Translated from the Orwellian this means making the rest of population feel guilty for not protecting the 'vulnerable' such as old people which the Cult and its agencies were about to kill on an industrial scale with lockdown, lack of treatment and the Gates 'vaccine'. Psychopath psychologists sold their guilt-trip so comprehensively that Los Angeles County Supervisor Hilda Solis reported that children were apologising (from a distance) to their parents and grandparents for bringing 'Covid' into their homes and getting them sick. '… These apologies are just some of the last words that loved ones will ever hear as they die alone,' she said. Gut-wrenchingly Solis then used this childhood tragedy to tell children to stay at home and 'keep your loved ones alive'. Imagine heaping such potentially life-long guilt on a kid when it has absolutely nothing to do with them. These people are deeply disturbed and the psychologists behind this even more so.

Uncivil war – divide and rule

Professional mind-controllers at SPI-B wanted the media to increase a sense of responsibility to others (do as you're told) and promote 'positive messaging' for those actions while in contrast to invoke 'social disapproval' by the unquestioning, obedient, community of anyone with a mind of their own. Again the compliant Goebbels-like media obliged. This is an old, old, trick employed by tyrannies the world over throughout human history. You get the target population to keep the target population in line – *your* line. SPI-B said this could 'play an important role in preventing anti-social behaviour or discouraging failure to enact pro-social behaviour'. For 'anti-social' in the Orwellian parlance of SPI-B see any behaviour that government doesn't approve. SPI-B recommendations said that 'social disapproval' should be accompanied by clear messaging and

promotion of strong collective identity – hence the government and celebrity mantra of 'we're all in this together'. Sure we are. The mind doctors have such contempt for their targets that they think some clueless comedian, actor or singer telling them to do what the government wants will be enough to win them over. We have had UK comedian Lenny Henry, actor Michael Caine and singer Elton John wheeled out to serve the propagandists by urging people to have the DNA-manipulating 'Covid' non-'vaccine'. The role of Henry and fellow black celebrities in seeking to coax a 'vaccine' reluctant black community into doing the government's will was especially stomach-turning. An emotion-manipulating script and carefully edited video featuring these black 'celebs' was such an insult to the intelligence of black people and where's the self-respect of those involved selling their souls to a fascist government agenda? Henry said he heard black people's 'legitimate worries and concerns', but people must 'trust the facts' when they were doing exactly that by not having the 'vaccine'. They had to include the obligatory reference to Black Lives Matter with the line … 'Don't let coronavirus cost even more black lives – because we matter'. My god, it was pathetic. 'I know the vaccine is safe and what it does.' How? 'I'm a comedian and it says so in my script.'

SPI-B said social disapproval needed to be carefully managed to avoid victimisation, scapegoating and misdirected criticism, but they knew that their 'recommendations' would lead to exactly that and the media were specifically used to stir-up the divide-and-conquer hostility. Those who conform like good little baa, baas, are praised while those who have seen through the tidal wave of lies are 'Covidiots'. The awake have been abused by the fast asleep for not conforming to fascism and impositions that the awake know are designed to endanger their health, dehumanise them, and tear asunder the very fabric of human society. We have had the curtain-twitchers and morons reporting neighbours and others to the face-nappied police for breaking 'Covid rules' with fascist police delighting in posting links and phone numbers where this could be done. The Cult cannot impose its will without a compliant police

and military or a compliant population willing to play their part in enslaving themselves and their kids. The words of a pastor in Nazi Germany are so appropriate today:

First they came for the socialists and I did not speak out because I was not a socialist.

Then they came for the trade unionists and I did not speak out because I was not a trade unionist.

Then they came for the Jews and I did not speak out because I was not a Jew.

Then they came for me and there was no one left to speak for me.

Those who don't learn from history are destined to repeat it and so many are.

'Covid' rules: Rewiring the mind

With the background laid out to this gigantic national and global web of psychological manipulation we can put 'Covid' rules into a clear and sinister perspective. Forget the claims about protecting health. 'Covid' rules are about dismantling the human mind, breaking the human spirit, destroying self-respect, and then putting Humpty Dumpty together again as a servile, submissive slave. Social isolation through lockdown and distancing have devastating effects on the human psyche as the psychological psychopaths well know and that's the real reason for them. Humans need contact with each other, discourse, closeness and touch, or they eventually, and literarily, go crazy. Masks, which I will address at some length, fundamentally add to the effects of isolation and the Cult agenda to dehumanise and de-individualise the population. To do this while knowing – in fact *seeking* – this outcome is the very epitome of evil and psychologists involved in this *are* the epitome of evil. They must like all the rest of the Cult demons and their assets stand trial for crimes against humanity on a scale that defies the imagination. Psychopaths in uniform use isolation to break enemy troops and agents and make them subservient and submissive to tell what they know. The technique is rightly considered a form of torture and

torture is most certainly what has been imposed on the human population.

Clinically-insane American psychologist Harry Harlow became famous for his isolation experiments in the 1950s in which he separated baby monkeys from their mothers and imprisoned them for months on end in a metal container or 'pit of despair'. They soon began to show mental distress and depression as any idiot could have predicted. Harlow put other monkeys in steel chambers for three, six or twelve months while denying them any contact with animals or humans. He said that the effects of total social isolation for six months were 'so devastating and debilitating that we had assumed initially that twelve months of isolation would not produce any additional decrement'; but twelve months of isolation 'almost obliterated the animals socially'. This is what the Cult and its psychopaths are doing to you and your children. Even monkeys in partial isolation in which they were not allowed to form relationships with other monkeys became 'aggressive and hostile, not only to others, but also towards their own bodies'. We have seen this in the young as a consequence of lockdown. UK government psychopaths launched a public relations campaign telling people not to hug each other even after they received the 'Covid-19 vaccine' which we were told with more lies would allow a return to 'normal life'. A government source told *The Telegraph*: 'It will be along the lines that it is great that you have been vaccinated, but if you are going to visit your family and hug your grandchildren there is a chance you are going to infect people you love.' The source was apparently speaking from a secure psychiatric facility. Janet Lord, director of Birmingham University's Institute of Inflammation and Ageing, said that parents and grandparents should avoid hugging their children. Well, how can I put it, Ms Lord? Fuck off. Yep, that'll do.

Destroying the kids – where are the parents?

Observe what has happened to people enslaved and isolated by lockdown as suicide and self-harm has soared worldwide,

particularly among the young denied the freedom to associate with their friends. A study of 49,000 people in English-speaking countries concluded that almost half of young adults are at clinical risk of mental health disorders. A national survey in America of 1,000 currently enrolled high school and college students found that 5 percent reported attempting suicide during the pandemic. Data from the US CDC's National Syndromic Surveillance Program from January 1st to October 17th, 2020, revealed a *31 percent* increase in mental health issues among adolescents aged 12 to 17 compared with 2019. The CDC reported that America in general suffered the biggest drop in life expectancy since World War Two as it fell by a year in the first half of 2020 as a result of 'deaths of despair' – overdoses and suicides. Deaths of despair have leapt by more than 20 percent during lockdown and include the highest number of fatal overdoses ever recorded in a single year – 81,000. Internet addiction is another consequence of being isolated at home which lowers interest in physical activities as kids fall into inertia and what's the point? Children and young people are losing hope and giving up on life, sometimes literally. A 14-year-old boy killed himself in Maryland because he had 'given up' when his school district didn't reopen; an 11-year-old boy shot himself during a zoom class; a teenager in Maine succumbed to the isolation of the 'pandemic' when he ended his life after experiencing a disrupted senior year at school. Children as young as nine have taken their life and all these stories can be repeated around the world. Careers are being destroyed before they start and that includes those in sport in which promising youngsters have not been able to take part. The plan of the psycho-psychologists is working all right. Researchers at Cambridge University found that lockdowns cause significant harm to children's mental health. Their study was published in the *Archives of Disease in Childhood*, and followed 168 children aged between 7 and 11. The researchers concluded:

> During the UK lockdown, children's depression symptoms have increased substantially, relative to before lockdown. The scale of this effect has direct relevance for the continuation of different elements of lockdown policy, such as complete or partial school closures …

… Specifically, we observed a statistically significant increase in ratings of depression, with a medium-to-large effect size. Our findings emphasise the need to incorporate the potential impact of lockdown on child mental health in planning the ongoing response to the global pandemic and the recovery from it.

Not a chance when the Cult's psycho-psychologists were getting exactly what they wanted. The UK's Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health has urged parents to look for signs of eating disorders in children and young people after a three to four fold increase. Specialists say the 'pandemic' is a major reason behind the rise. You don't say. The College said isolation from friends during school closures, exam cancellations, loss of extra-curricular activities like sport, and an increased use of social media were all contributory factors along with fears about the virus (psycho-psychologists again), family finances, and students being forced to quarantine. Doctors said young people were becoming severely ill by the time they were seen with 'Covid' regulations reducing face-to-face consultations. Nor is it only the young that have been devastated by the psychopaths. Like all bullies and cowards the Cult is targeting the young, elderly, weak and infirm. A typical story was told by a British lady called Lynn Parker who was not allowed to visit her husband in 2020 for the last ten and half months of his life 'when he needed me most' between March 20th and when he died on December 19th. This vacates the criminal and enters the territory of evil. The emotional impact on the immune system alone is immense as are the number of people of all ages worldwide who have died as a result of Cult-demanded, Gates-demanded, lockdowns.

Isolation is torture

The experience of imposing solitary confinement on millions of prisoners around the world has shown how a large percentage become 'actively psychotic and/or acutely suicidal'. Social isolation has been found to trigger 'a specific psychiatric syndrome, characterized by hallucinations; panic attacks; overt paranoia; diminished impulse control; hypersensitivity to external stimuli; and difficulties with thinking, concentration and memory'. Juan Mendez,

a United Nations rapporteur (investigator), said that isolation is a form of torture. Research has shown that even after isolation prisoners find it far more difficult to make social connections and I remember chatting to a shop assistant after one lockdown who told me that when her young son met another child again he had no idea how to act or what to do. Hannah Flanagan, Director of Emergency Services at Journey Mental Health Center in Dane County, Wisconsin, said: 'The specificity about Covid social distancing and isolation that we've come across as contributing factors to the suicides are really new to us this year.' But they are not new to those that devised them. They are getting the effect they want as the population is psychologically dismantled to be rebuilt in a totally different way. Children and the young are particularly targeted. They will be the adults when the full-on fascist AI-controlled technocracy is planned to be imposed and they are being prepared to meekly submit. At the same time older people who still have a memory of what life was like before – and how fascist the new normal really is – are being deleted. You are going to see efforts to turn the young against the old to support this geriatric genocide. Hannah Flanagan said the big increase in suicide in her county proved that social isolation is not only harmful, but deadly. Studies have shown that isolation from others is one of the main risk factors in suicide and even more so with women. Warnings that lockdown could create a 'perfect storm' for suicide were ignored. After all this was one of the *reasons* for lockdown. Suicide, however, is only the most extreme of isolation consequences. There are many others. Dr Dhruv Khullar, assistant professor of healthcare policy at Weill Cornell Medical College, said in a *New York Times* article in 2016 long before the fake 'pandemic':

> A wave of new research suggests social separation is bad for us. Individuals with less social connection have disrupted sleep patterns, altered immune systems, more inflammation and higher levels of stress hormones. One recent study found that isolation increases the risk of heart disease by 29 percent and stroke by 32 percent. Another analysis that pooled data from 70 studies and 3.4 million people found that socially isolated individuals had a 30 percent higher risk of dying in the next seven years, and that this effect was largest in middle age.

Loneliness can accelerate cognitive decline in older adults, and isolated individuals are twice as likely to die prematurely as those with more robust social interactions. These effects start early: Socially isolated children have significantly poorer health 20 years later, even after controlling for other factors. All told, loneliness is as important a risk factor for early death as obesity and smoking.

There you have proof from that one article alone four years before 2020 that those who have enforced lockdown, social distancing and isolation knew what the effect would be and that is even more so with professional psychologists that have been driving the policy across the globe. We can go back even further to the years 2000 and 2003 and the start of a major study on the effects of isolation on health by Dr Janine Gronewold and Professor Dirk M. Hermann at the University Hospital in Essen, Germany, who analysed data on 4,316 people with an average age of 59 who were recruited for the long-term research project. They found that socially isolated people are more than 40 percent more likely to have a heart attack, stroke, or other major cardiovascular event and nearly 50 percent more likely to die from any cause. Given the financial Armageddon unleashed by lockdown we should note that the study found a relationship between increased cardiovascular risk and lack of financial support. After excluding other factors social isolation was still connected to a 44 percent increased risk of cardiovascular problems and a 47 percent increased risk of death by any cause. Lack of financial support was associated with a 30 percent increase in the risk of cardiovascular health events. Dr Gronewold said it had been known for some time that feeling lonely or lacking contact with close friends and family can have an impact on physical health and the study had shown that having strong social relationships is of high importance for heart health. Gronewold said they didn't understand yet why people who are socially isolated have such poor health outcomes, but this was obviously a worrying finding, particularly during these times of prolonged social distancing. Well, it can be explained on many levels. You only have to identify the point in the body where people feel loneliness and missing people they are parted from – it's in the centre of the chest where they feel the ache of loneliness and the ache of missing people. 'My heart aches for

you' … 'My heart aches for some company.' I will explain this more in the chapter Escaping Wetiko, but when you realise that the body is the mind – they are expressions of each other – the reason why state of the mind dictates state of the body becomes clear.

American psychologist Ranjit Powar was highlighting the effects of lockdown isolation as early as April, 2020. She said humans have evolved to be social creatures and are wired to live in interactive groups. Being isolated from family, friends and colleagues could be unbalancing and traumatic for most people and could result in short or even long-term psychological and physical health problems. An increase in levels of anxiety, aggression, depression, forgetfulness and hallucinations were possible psychological effects of isolation. 'Mental conditions may be precipitated for those with underlying pre-existing susceptibilities and show up in many others without any pre-condition.' Powar said personal relationships helped us cope with stress and if we lost this outlet for letting off steam the result can be a big emotional void which, for an average person, was difficult to deal with. 'Just a few days of isolation can cause increased levels of anxiety and depression' – so what the hell has been the effect on the global population of *18 months* of this at the time of writing? Powar said: 'Add to it the looming threat of a dreadful disease being repeatedly hammered in through the media and you have a recipe for many shades of mental and physical distress.' For those with a house and a garden it is easy to forget that billions have had to endure lockdown isolation in tiny overcrowded flats and apartments with nowhere to go outside. The psychological and physical consequences of this are unimaginable and with lunatic and abusive partners and parents the consequences have led to tremendous increases in domestic and child abuse and alcoholism as people seek to shut out the horror. Ranjit Powar said:

Staying in a confined space with family is not all a rosy picture for everyone. It can be extremely oppressive and claustrophobic for large low-income families huddled together in small single-room houses. Children here are not lucky enough to have many board/electronic games or books to keep them occupied.

Add to it the deep insecurity of running out of funds for food and basic necessities. On the other hand, there are people with dysfunctional family dynamics, such as domineering, abusive or alcoholic partners, siblings or parents which makes staying home a period of trial. Incidence of suicide and physical abuse against women has shown a worldwide increase. Heightened anxiety and depression also affect a person's immune system, making them more susceptible to illness.

To think that Powar's article was published on April 11th, 2020.

Six-feet fantasy

Social (unsocial) distancing demanded that people stay six feet or two metres apart. UK government advisor Robert Dingwall from the New and Emerging Respiratory Virus Threats Advisory Group said in a radio interview that the two-metre rule was 'conjured up out of nowhere' and was not based on science. No, it was not based on *medical* science, but it didn't come out of nowhere. The distance related to *psychological* science. Six feet/two metres was adopted in many countries and we were told by people like the criminal Anthony Fauci and his ilk that it was founded on science. Many schools could not reopen because they did not have the space for six-feet distancing. Then in March, 2021, after a year of six-feet 'science', a study published in the *Journal of Infectious Diseases* involving more than 500,000 students and almost 100,000 staff over 16 weeks revealed no significant difference in 'Covid' cases between six feet and three feet and Fauci changed his tune. Now three feet was okay. There is no difference between six feet and three *inches* when there is no 'virus' and they got away with six feet for psychological reasons for as long as they could. I hear journalists and others talk about 'unintended consequences' of lockdown. They are not *unintended* at all; they have been coldly-calculated for a specific outcome of human control and that's why super-psychopaths like Gates have called for them so vehemently. Super-psychopath psychologists have demanded them and psychopathic or clueless, spineless, politicians have gone along with them by 'following the science'. But it's not science at all. 'Science' is not what is; it's only what people can be manipulated to believe it is. The whole 'Covid' catastrophe is

founded on mind control. Three word or three statement mantras issued by the UK government are a well-known mind control technique and so we've had 'Stay home/protect the NHS/save lives', 'Stay alert/control the virus/save lives' and 'hands/face/space'. One of the most vocal proponents of extreme 'Covid' rules in the UK has been Professor Susan Michie, a member of the British Communist Party, who is not a medical professional. Michie is the director of the Centre for Behaviour Change at University College London. She is a *behavioural psychologist* and another filthy rich 'Marxist' who praised China's draconian lockdown. She was known by fellow students at Oxford University as 'Stalin's nanny' for her extreme Marxism. Michie is an influential member of the UK government's Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE) and behavioural manipulation groups which have dominated 'Covid' policy. She is a consultant adviser to the World Health Organization on 'Covid-19' and behaviour. Why the hell are lockdowns anything to do with her when they are claimed to be about health? Why does a behavioural psychologist from a group charged with changing the behaviour of the public want lockdown, human isolation and mandatory masks? Does that question really need an answer? Michie *absolutely* has to explain herself before a Nuremberg court when humanity takes back its world again and even more so when you see the consequences of masks that she demands are compulsory. This is a Michie classic:

> The benefits of getting primary school children to wear masks is that regardless of what little degree of transmission is occurring in those age groups it could help normalise the practice. Young children wearing masks may be more likely to get their families to accept masks.

Those words alone should carry a prison sentence when you ponder on the callous disregard for children involved and what a statement it makes about the mind and motivations of Susan Michie. What a lovely lady and what she said there encapsulates the mentality of the psychopaths behind the 'Covid' horror. Let us compare what Michie said with a countrywide study in Germany published at researchsquare.com involving 25,000 school children and 17,854 health complaints submitted by parents. Researchers

found that masks are harming children physically, psychologically, and behaviourally with 24 health issues associated with mask wearing. They include: shortness of breath (29.7%); dizziness (26.4%); increased headaches (53%); difficulty concentrating (50%); drowsiness or fatigue (37%); and malaise (42%). Nearly a third of children experienced more sleep issues than before and a quarter developed new fears. Researchers found health issues and other impairments in 68 percent of masked children covering their faces for an average of 4.5 hours a day. Hundreds of those taking part experienced accelerated respiration, tightness in the chest, weakness, and short-term impairment of consciousness. A reminder of what Michie said again:

The benefits of getting primary school children to wear masks is that regardless of what little degree of transmission is occurring in those age groups it could help normalise the practice. Young children wearing masks may be more likely to get their families to accept masks.

Psychopaths in government and psychology now have children and young people – plus all the adults – wearing masks for hours on end while clueless teachers impose the will of the psychopaths on the young they should be protecting. What the hell are parents doing?

Cult lab rats

We have some schools already imposing on students microchipped buzzers that activate when they get 'too close' to their pals in the way they do with lab rats. How apt. To the Cult and its brain-dead servants our children *are* lab rats being conditioned to be unquestioning, dehumanised slaves for the rest of their lives. Children and young people are being weaned and frightened away from the most natural human instincts including closeness and touch. I have tracked in the books over the years how schools were banning pupils from greeting each other with a hug and the whole Cult-induced Me Too movement has terrified men and boys from a relaxed and natural interaction with female friends and work colleagues to the point where many men try never to be in a room

alone with a woman that's not their partner. Airhead celebrities have as always played their virtue-signalling part in making this happen with their gross exaggeration. For every monster like Harvey Weinstein there are at least tens of thousands of men that don't treat women like that; but everyone must be branded the same and policy changed for them as well as the monster. I am going to be using the word 'dehumanise' many times in this chapter because that is what the Cult is seeking to do and it goes very deep as we shall see. Don't let them kid you that social distancing is planned to end one day. That's not the idea. We are seeing more governments and companies funding and producing wearable gadgets to keep people apart and they would not be doing that if this was meant to be short-term. A tech start-up company backed by GCHQ, the British Intelligence and military surveillance headquarters, has created a social distancing wrist sensor that alerts people when they get too close to others. The CIA has also supported tech companies developing similar devices. The wearable sensor was developed by Tended, one of a number of start-up companies supported by GCHQ (see the CIA and DARPA). The device can be worn on the wrist or as a tag on the waistband and will vibrate whenever someone wearing the device breaches social distancing and gets anywhere near natural human contact. The company had a lucky break in that it was developing a distancing sensor when the 'Covid' hoax arrived which immediately provided a potentially enormous market. How fortunate. The government in big-time Cult-controlled Ontario in Canada is investing $2.5 million in wearable contact tracing technology that 'will alert users if they may have been exposed to the Covid-19 in the workplace and will beep or vibrate if they are within six feet of another person'. Facedrive Inc., the technology company behind this, was founded in 2016 with funding from the Ontario Together Fund and obviously they, too, had a prophet on the board of directors. The human surveillance and control technology is called TraceSCAN and would be worn by the human cyborgs in places such as airports, workplaces, construction sites, care homes and … *schools*.

I emphasise schools with children and young people the prime targets. You know what is planned for society as a whole if you keep your eyes on the schools. They have always been places where the state program the next generation of slaves to be its compliant worker-ants – or Woker-ants these days; but in the mist of the 'Covid' madness they have been transformed into mind laboratories on a scale never seen before. Teachers and head teachers are just as programmed as the kids – often more so. Children are kept apart from human interaction by walk lanes, classroom distancing, staggered meal times, masks, and the rolling-out of buzzer systems. Schools are now physically laid out as a laboratory maze for lab-rats. Lunatics at a school in Anchorage, Alaska, who should be prosecuted for child abuse, took away desks and forced children to kneel (know your place) on a mat for five hours a day while wearing a mask and using their chairs as a desk. How this was supposed to impact on a 'virus' only these clinically insane people can tell you and even then it would be clap-trap. The school banned recess (interaction), art classes (creativity), and physical exercise (getting body and mind moving out of inertia). Everyone behind this outrage should be in jail or better still a mental institution. The behavioural manipulators are all for this dystopian approach to schools. Professor Susan Michie, the mind-doctor and British Communist Party member, said it was wrong to say that schools were safe. They had to be made so by 'distancing', masks and ventilation (sitting all day in the cold). I must ask this lady round for dinner on a night I know I am going to be out and not back for weeks. She probably wouldn't be able to make it, anyway, with all the visits to her own psychologist she must have block-booked.

Masking identity

I know how shocking it must be for you that a behaviour manipulator like Michie wants everyone to wear masks which have long been a feature of mind-control programs like the infamous MKUltra in the United States, but, there we are. We live and learn. I spent many years from 1996 to right across the millennium

researching mind control in detail on both sides of the Atlantic and elsewhere. I met a large number of mind-control survivors and many had been held captive in body and mind by MKUltra. MK stands for mind-control, but employs the German spelling in deference to the Nazis spirited out of Germany at the end of World War Two by Operation Paperclip in which the US authorities, with help from the Vatican, transported Nazi mind-controllers and engineers to America to continue their work. Many of them were behind the creation of NASA and they included Nazi scientist and SS officer Wernher von Braun who swapped designing V-2 rockets to bombard London with designing the Saturn V rockets that powered the NASA moon programme's Apollo craft. I think I may have mentioned that the Cult has no borders. Among Paperclip escapees was Josef Mengele, the Angel of Death in the Nazi concentration camps where he conducted mind and genetic experiments on children often using twins to provide a control twin to measure the impact of his 'work' on the other. If you want to observe the Cult mentality in all its extremes of evil then look into the life of Mengele. I have met many people who suffered mercilessly under Mengele in the United States where he operated under the name Dr Greene and became a stalwart of MKUltra programming and torture. Among his locations was the underground facility in the Mojave Desert in California called the China Lake Naval Weapons Station which is almost entirely below the surface. My books *The Biggest Secret*, *Children of the Matrix* and *The Perception Deception* have the detailed background to MKUltra.

The best-known MKUltra survivor is American Cathy O'Brien. I first met her and her late partner Mark Phillips at a conference in Colorado in 1996. Mark helped her escape and deprogram from decades of captivity in an offshoot of MKUltra known as Project Monarch in which 'sex slaves' were provided for the rich and famous including Father George Bush, Dick Cheney and the Clintons. Read Cathy and Mark's book *Trance-Formation of America* and if you are new to this you will be shocked to the core. I read it in 1996 shortly before, with the usual synchronicity of my life, I found

myself given a book table at the conference right next to hers. MKUltra never ended despite being very publicly exposed (only a small part of it) in the 1970s and continues in other guises. I am still in touch with Cathy. She contacted me during 2020 after masks became compulsory in many countries to tell me how they were used as part of MKUltra programming. I had been observing 'Covid regulations' and the relationship between authority and public for months. I saw techniques that I knew were employed on individuals in MKUltra being used on the global population. I had read many books and manuals on mind control including one called *Silent Weapons for Quiet Wars* which came to light in the 1980s and was a guide on how to perceptually program on a mass scale. 'Silent Weapons' refers to mind-control. I remembered a line from the manual as governments, medical authorities and law enforcement agencies have so obviously talked to – or rather at – the adult population since the 'Covid' hoax began as if they are children. The document said:

> If a person is spoken to by a T.V. advertiser as if he were a twelve-year-old, then, due to suggestibility, he will, with a certain probability, respond or react to that suggestion with the uncritical response of a twelve-year-old and will reach in to his economic reservoir and deliver its energy to buy that product on impulse when he passes it in the store.

That's why authority has spoken to adults like children since all this began.

Why did Michael Jackson wear masks?

Every aspect of the 'Covid' narrative has mind-control as its central theme. Cathy O'Brien wrote an article for davidicke.com about the connection between masks and mind control. Her daughter Kelly who I first met in the 1990s was born while Cathy was still held captive in MKUltra. Kelly was forced to wear a mask as part of her programming from the age of *two* to dehumanise her, target her sense of individuality and reduce the amount of oxygen her brain and body received. *Bingo*. This is the real reason for compulsory

masks, why they have been enforced en masse, and why they seek to increase the number they demand you wear. First one, then two, with one disgraceful alleged 'doctor' recommending four which is nothing less than a death sentence. Where and how often they must be worn is being expanded for the purpose of mass mind control and damaging respiratory health which they can call 'Covid-19'. Canada's government headed by the man-child Justin Trudeau, says it's fine for children of two and older to wear masks. An insane 'study' in Italy involving just 47 children concluded there was no problem for babies as young as *four months* wearing them. Even after people were 'vaccinated' they were still told to wear masks by the criminal that is Anthony Fauci. Cathy wrote that mandating masks is allowing the authorities literally to control the air we breathe which is what was done in MKUltra. You might recall how the singer Michael Jackson wore masks and there is a reason for that. He was subjected to MKUltra mind control through Project Monarch and his psyche was scrambled by these simpletons. Cathy wrote:

In MKUltra Project Monarch mind control, Michael Jackson had to wear a mask to silence his voice so he could not reach out for help. Remember how he developed that whisper voice when he wasn't singing? Masks control the mind from the outside in, like the redefining of words is doing. By controlling what we can and cannot say for fear of being labeled racist or beaten, for example, it ultimately controls thought that drives our words and ultimately actions (or lack thereof).

Likewise, a mask muffles our speech so that we are not heard, which controls voice … words … mind. This is Mind Control. Masks are an obvious mind control device, and I am disturbed so many people are complying on a global scale. Masks depersonalize while making a person feel as though they have no voice. It is a barrier to others. People who would never choose to comply but are forced to wear a mask in order to keep their job, and ultimately their family fed, are compromised. They often feel shame and are subdued. People have stopped talking with each other while media controls the narrative.

The 'no voice' theme has often become literal with train passengers told not to speak to each other in case they pass on the 'virus', singing banned for the same reason and bonkers California officials telling people riding roller coasters that they cannot shout and scream. Cathy said she heard every day from healed MKUltra survivors who cannot wear a mask without flashing back on ways

their breathing was controlled – 'from ball gags and penises to water boarding'. She said that through the years when she saw images of people in China wearing masks 'due to pollution' that it was really to control their oxygen levels. 'I knew it was as much of a population control mechanism of depersonalisation as are burkas', she said. Masks are another Chinese communist/fascist method of control that has been swept across the West as the West becomes China at lightning speed since we entered 2020.

Mask-19

There are other reasons for mandatory masks and these include destroying respiratory health to call it 'Covid-19' and stunting brain development of children and the young. Dr Margarite Griesz-Brisson MD, PhD, is a Consultant Neurologist and Neurophysiologist and the Founder and Medical Director of the London Neurology and Pain Clinic. Her CV goes down the street and round the corner. She is clearly someone who cares about people and won't parrot the propaganda. Griesz-Brisson has a PhD in pharmacology, with special interest in neurotoxicology, environmental medicine, neuroregeneration and neuroplasticity (the way the brain can change in the light of information received). She went public in October, 2020, with a passionate warning about the effects of mask-wearing laws:

> The reinhalation of our exhaled air will without a doubt create oxygen deficiency and a flooding of carbon dioxide. We know that the human brain is very sensitive to oxygen deprivation. There are nerve cells for example in the hippocampus that can't be longer than 3 minutes without oxygen – they cannot survive. The acute warning symptoms are headaches, drowsiness, dizziness, issues in concentration, slowing down of reaction time – reactions of the cognitive system.

Oh, I know, let's tell bus, truck and taxi drivers to wear them and people working machinery. How about pilots, doctors and police? Griesz-Brisson makes the important point that while the symptoms she mentions may fade as the body readjusts this does not alter the fact that people continue to operate in oxygen deficit with long list of

potential consequences. She said it was well known that neurodegenerative diseases take years or decades to develop. 'If today you forget your phone number, the breakdown in your brain would have already started 20 or 30 years ago.' She said degenerative processes in your brain are getting amplified as your oxygen deprivation continues through wearing a mask. Nerve cells in the brain are unable to divide themselves normally in these circumstances and lost nerve cells will no longer be regenerated. 'What is gone is gone.' Now consider that people like shop workers and *schoolchildren* are wearing masks for hours every day. What in the name of sanity is going to be happening to them? 'I do not wear a mask, I need my brain to think', Griesz-Brisson said, 'I want to have a clear head when I deal with my patients and not be in a carbon dioxide-induced anaesthesia'. If you are told to wear a mask anywhere ask the organisation, police, store, whatever, for their risk assessment on the dangers and negative effects on mind and body of enforcing mask-wearing. They won't have one because it has never been done not even by government. All of them must be subject to class-action lawsuits as the consequences come to light. They don't do mask risk assessments for an obvious reason. They know what the conclusions would be and independent scientific studies that *have* been done tell a horror story of consequences.

'Masks are criminal'

Dr Griesz-Brisson said that for children and adolescents, masks are an absolute no-no. They had an extremely active and adaptive immune system and their brain was incredibly active with so much to learn. 'The child's brain, or the youth's brain, is thirsting for oxygen.' The more metabolically active an organ was, the more oxygen it required; and in children and adolescents every organ was metabolically active. Griesz-Brisson said that to deprive a child's or adolescent's brain of oxygen, or to restrict it in any way, was not only dangerous to their health, it was absolutely criminal. 'Oxygen deficiency inhibits the development of the brain, and the damage that has taken place as a result CANNOT be reversed.' Mind

manipulators of MKUltra put masks on two-year-olds they wanted to neurologically rewire and you can see why. Griesz-Brisson said a child needs the brain to learn and the brain needs oxygen to function. 'We don't need a clinical study for that. This is simple, indisputable physiology.' Consciously and purposely induced oxygen deficiency was an absolutely deliberate health hazard, and an absolute medical contraindication which means that 'this drug, this therapy, this method or measure should not be used, and is not allowed to be used'. To coerce an entire population to use an absolute medical contraindication by force, she said, there had to be definite and serious reasons and the reasons must be presented to competent interdisciplinary and independent bodies to be verified and authorised. She had this warning of the consequences that were coming if mask wearing continued:

When, in ten years, dementia is going to increase exponentially, and the younger generations couldn't reach their god-given potential, it won't help to say 'we didn't need the masks'. I know how damaging oxygen deprivation is for the brain, cardiologists know how damaging it is for the heart, pulmonologists know how damaging it is for the lungs. Oxygen deprivation damages every single organ. Where are our health departments, our health insurance, our medical associations? It would have been their duty to be vehemently against the lockdown and to stop it and stop it from the very beginning.

Why do the medical boards issue punishments to doctors who give people exemptions? Does the person or the doctor seriously have to prove that oxygen deprivation harms people? What kind of medicine are our doctors and medical associations representing? Who is responsible for this crime? The ones who want to enforce it? The ones who let it happen and play along, or the ones who don't prevent it?

All of the organisations and people she mentions there either answer directly to the Cult or do whatever hierarchical levels above them tell them to do. The outcome of both is the same. 'It's not about masks, it's not about viruses, it's certainly not about your health', Griesz-Brisson said. 'It is about much, much more. I am not participating. I am not afraid.' They were taking our air to breathe and there was no unfounded medical exemption from face masks. Oxygen deprivation was dangerous for every single brain. It had to be the free decision of every human being whether they want to

wear a mask that was absolutely ineffective to protect themselves from a virus. She ended by rightly identifying where the responsibility lies for all this:

> The imperative of the hour is personal responsibility. We are responsible for what we think, not the media. We are responsible for what we do, not our superiors. We are responsible for our health, not the World Health Organization. And we are responsible for what happens in our country, not the government.

Halle-bloody-lujah.

But surgeons wear masks, right?

Independent studies of mask-wearing have produced a long list of reports detailing mental, emotional and physical dangers. What a definition of insanity to see police officers imposing mask-wearing on the public which will cumulatively damage their health while the police themselves wear masks that will cumulatively damage *their* health. It's utter madness and both public and police do this because 'the government says so' – yes a government of brain-donor idiots like UK Health Secretary Matt Hancock reading the 'follow the science' scripts of psychopathic, lunatic psychologists. The response you get from Stockholm syndrome sufferers defending the very authorities that are destroying them and their families is that 'surgeons wear masks'. This is considered the game, set and match that they must work and don't cause oxygen deficit. Well, actually, scientific studies have shown that they *do* and oxygen levels are monitored in operating theatres to compensate. Surgeons wear masks to stop spittle and such like dropping into open wounds – not to stop 'viral particles' which are so miniscule they can only be seen through an electron microscope. Holes in the masks are significantly bigger than 'viral particles' and if you sneeze or cough they will breach the mask. I watched an incredibly disingenuous 'experiment' that claimed to prove that masks work in catching 'virus' material from the mouth and nose. They did this with a slow motion camera and the mask did block big stuff which stayed inside the mask and

against the face to be breathed in or cause infections on the face as we have seen with many children. 'Viral particles', however, would never have been picked up by the camera as they came through the mask when they are far too small to be seen. The 'experiment' was therefore disingenuous *and* useless.

Studies have concluded that wearing masks in operating theatres (and thus elsewhere) make no difference to preventing infection while the opposite is true with toxic shite building up in the mask and this had led to an explosion in tooth decay and gum disease dubbed by dentists 'mask mouth'. You might have seen the Internet video of a furious American doctor urging people to take off their masks after a four-year-old patient had been rushed to hospital the night before and nearly died with a lung infection that doctors sourced to mask wearing. A study in the journal *Cancer Discovery* found that inhalation of harmful microbes can contribute to advanced stage lung cancer in adults and long-term use of masks can help breed dangerous pathogens. Microbiologists have said frequent mask wearing creates a moist environment in which microbes can grow and proliferate before entering the lungs. The Canadian Agency for Drugs and Technologies in Health, or CADTH, a Canadian national organisation that provides research and analysis to healthcare decision-makers, said this as long ago as 2013 in a report entitled 'Use of Surgical Masks in the Operating Room: A Review of the Clinical Effectiveness and Guidelines'. It said:

- No evidence was found to support the use of surgical face masks to reduce the frequency of surgical site infections
- No evidence was found on the effectiveness of wearing surgical face masks to protect staff from infectious material in the operating room.
- Guidelines recommend the use of surgical face masks by staff in the operating room to protect both operating room staff and patients (despite the lack of evidence).

We were told that the world could go back to 'normal' with the arrival of the 'vaccines'. When they came, fraudulent as they are, the story changed as I knew that it would. We are in the midst of transforming 'normal', not going back to it. Mary Ramsay, head of immunisation at Public Health England, echoed the words of US criminal Anthony Fauci who said masks and other regulations must stay no matter if people are vaccinated. The Fauci idiot continued to wear two masks – different colours so both could be clearly seen – after he *claimed* to have been vaccinated. Senator Rand Paul told Fauci in one exchange that his double-masks were 'theatre' and he was right. It's all theatre. Mary Ramsay back-tracked on the vaccine-return-to-normal theme when she said the public may need to wear masks and social-distance for years despite the jabs. 'People have got used to those lower-level restrictions now, and [they] can live with them', she said telling us what the idea has been all along. 'The vaccine does not give you a pass, even if you have had it, you must continue to follow all the guidelines' said a Public Health England statement which reneged on what we had been told before and made having the 'vaccine' irrelevant to 'normality' even by the official story. Spain's fascist government trumped everyone by passing a law mandating the wearing of masks on the beach and even when swimming in the sea. The move would have devastated what's left of the Spanish tourist industry, posed potential breathing dangers to swimmers and had Northern European sunbathers walking around with their forehead brown and the rest of their face white as a sheet. The ruling was so crazy that it had to be retracted after pressure from public and tourist industry, but it confirmed where the Cult wants to go with masks and how clinically insane authority has become. The determination to make masks permanent and hide the serious dangers to body and mind can be seen in the censorship of scientist Professor Denis Rancourt by Bill Gates-funded academic publishing website ResearchGate over his papers exposing the dangers and uselessness of masks. Rancourt said:

ResearchGate today has permanently locked my account, which I have had since 2015. Their reasons graphically show the nature of their attack against democracy, and their corruption of

science … By their obscene non-logic, a scientific review of science articles reporting on harms caused by face masks has a 'potential to cause harm'. No criticism of the psychological device (face masks) is tolerated, if the said criticism shows potential to influence public policy.

This is what happens in a fascist world.

Where are the 'greens' (again)?

Other dangers of wearing masks especially regularly relate to the inhalation of minute plastic fibres into the lungs and the deluge of discarded masks in the environment and oceans. Estimates predicted that more than 1.5 billion disposable masks will end up in the world's oceans every year polluting the water with tons of plastic and endangering marine wildlife. Studies project that humans are using 129 billion face masks each month worldwide – about three million a minute. Most are disposable and made from plastic, non-biodegradable microfibers that break down into smaller plastic particles that become widespread in ecosystems. They are littering cities, clogging sewage channels and turning up in bodies of water. I have written in other books about the immense amounts of microplastics from endless sources now being absorbed into the body. Rolf Halden, director of the Arizona State University (ASU) Biodesign Center for Environmental Health Engineering, was the senior researcher in a 2020 study that analysed 47 human tissue samples and found microplastics in all of them. 'We have detected these chemicals of plastics in every single organ that we have investigated', he said. I wrote in *The Answer* about the world being deluged with microplastics. A study by the Worldwide Fund for Nature (WWF) found that people are consuming on average every week some 2,000 tiny pieces of plastic mostly through water and also through marine life and the air. Every year humans are ingesting enough microplastics to fill a heaped dinner plate and in a life-time of 79 years it is enough to fill two large waste bins. Marco Lambertini, WWF International director general said: 'Not only are plastics polluting our oceans and waterways and killing marine life – it's in all of us and we can't escape consuming plastics,' American

geologists found tiny plastic fibres, beads and shards in rainwater samples collected from the remote slopes of the Rocky Mountain National Park near Denver, Colorado. Their report was headed: 'It is raining plastic.' Rachel Adams, senior lecturer in Biomedical Science at Cardiff Metropolitan University, said that among health consequences are internal inflammation and immune responses to a 'foreign body'. She further pointed out that microplastics become carriers of toxins including mercury, pesticides and dioxins (a known cause of cancer and reproductive and developmental problems). These toxins accumulate in the fatty tissues once they enter the body through microplastics. Now this is being compounded massively by people putting plastic on their face and throwing it away.

Workers exposed to polypropylene plastic fibres known as 'flock' have developed 'flock worker's lung' from inhaling small pieces of the flock fibres which can damage lung tissue, reduce breathing capacity and exacerbate other respiratory problems. *Now* … commonly used surgical masks have three layers of melt-blown textiles made of … polypropylene. We have billions of people putting these microplastics against their mouth, nose and face for hours at a time day after day in the form of masks. How does anyone think that will work out? I mean – what could possibly go wrong? We posted a number of scientific studies on this at davidicke.com, but when I went back to them as I was writing this book the links to the science research website where they were hosted were dead. Anything that challenges the official narrative in any way is either censored or vilified. The official narrative is so unsupportable by the evidence that only deleting the truth can protect it. A study by Chinese scientists still survived – with the usual twist which it why it was still active, I guess. Yes, they found that virtually all the masks they tested increased the daily intake of microplastic fibres, but people should still wear them because the danger from the 'virus' was worse said the crazy 'team' from the Institute of Hydrobiology in Wuhan. Scientists first discovered microplastics in lung tissue of some patients who died of lung cancer

in the 1990s. Subsequent studies have confirmed the potential health damage with the plastic degrading slowly and remaining in the lungs to accumulate in volume. Wuhan researchers used a machine simulating human breathing to establish that masks shed up to nearly 4,000 microplastic fibres in a month with reused masks producing more. Scientists said some masks are laced with toxic chemicals and a variety of compounds seriously restricted for both health and environmental reasons. They include cobalt (used in blue dye) and formaldehyde known to cause watery eyes, burning sensations in the eyes, nose, and throat, plus coughing, wheezing and nausea. No – that must be 'Covid-19'.

Mask 'worms'

There is another and potentially even more sinister content of masks. Mostly new masks of different makes filmed under a microscope around the world have been found to contain strange black fibres or 'worms' that appear to move or 'crawl' by themselves and react to heat and water. The nearest I have seen to them are the self-replicating fibres that are pulled out through the skin of those suffering from Morgellons disease which has been connected to the phenomena of 'chemtrails' which I will bring into the story later on. Morgellons fibres continue to grow outside the body and have a form of artificial intelligence. Black 'worm' fibres in masks have that kind of feel to them and there is a nanotechnology technique called 'worm micelles' which carry and release drugs or anything else you want to deliver to the body. For sure the suppression of humanity by mind altering drugs is the Cult agenda big time and the more excuses they can find to gain access to the body the more opportunities there are to make that happen whether through 'vaccines' or masks pushed against the mouth and nose for hours on end.

So let us summarise the pros and cons of masks:

Against masks: Breathing in your own carbon dioxide; depriving the body and brain of sufficient oxygen; build-up of toxins in the mask that can be breathed into the lungs and cause rashes on the face and 'mask-mouth'; breathing microplastic fibres and toxic chemicals into the lungs; dehumanisation and deleting individualisation by literally making people faceless; destroying human emotional interaction through facial expression and deleting parental connection with their babies which look for guidance to their facial expression.

For masks: They don't protect you from a 'virus' that doesn't exist and even if it did 'viral' particles are so minute they are smaller than the holes in the mask.

Governments, police, supermarkets, businesses, transport companies, and all the rest who seek to impose masks have done no risk assessment on their consequences for health and psychology and are now open to group lawsuits when the impact becomes clear with a cumulative epidemic of respiratory and other disease. Authorities will try to exploit these effects and hide the real cause by dubbing them 'Covid-19'. Can you imagine setting out to force the population to wear health-destroying masks without doing any assessment of the risks? It is criminal and it is evil, but then how many people targeted in this way, who see their children told to wear them all day at school, have asked for a risk assessment? Billions can't be imposed upon by the few unless the billions allow it. Oh, yes, with just a tinge of irony, 85 percent of all masks made worldwide come from *China*.

Wash your hands in toxic shite

'Covid' rules include the use of toxic sanitisers and again the health consequences of constantly applying toxins to be absorbed through the skin is obvious to any level of Renegade Mind. America's Food and Drug Administration (FDA) said that sanitisers are drugs and issued a warning about 75 dangerous brands which contain

methanol used in antifreeze and can cause death, kidney damage and blindness. The FDA circulated the following warning even for those brands that it claims to be safe:

Store hand sanitizer out of the reach of pets and children, and children should use it only with adult supervision. Do not drink hand sanitizer. This is particularly important for young children, especially toddlers, who may be attracted by the pleasant smell or brightly colored bottles of hand sanitizer.

Drinking even a small amount of hand sanitizer can cause alcohol poisoning in children. (However, there is no need to be concerned if your children eat with or lick their hands after using hand sanitizer.) During this coronavirus pandemic, poison control centers have had an increase in calls about accidental ingestion of hand sanitizer, so it is important that adults monitor young children's use.

Do not allow pets to swallow hand sanitizer. If you think your pet has eaten something potentially dangerous, call your veterinarian or a pet poison control center right away. Hand sanitizer is flammable and should be stored away from heat and flames. When using hand sanitizer, rub your hands until they feel completely dry before performing activities that may involve heat, sparks, static electricity, or open flames.

There you go, perfectly safe, then, and that's without even a mention of the toxins absorbed through the skin. Come on kids – sanitise your hands everywhere you go. It will save you from the 'virus'. Put all these elements together of the 'Covid' normal and see how much health and psychology is being cumulatively damaged, even devastated, to 'protect your health'. Makes sense, right? They are only imposing these things because they care, right? *Right?*

Submitting to insanity

Psychological reframing of the population goes very deep and is done in many less obvious ways. I hear people say how contradictory and crazy 'Covid' rules are and how they are ever changing. This is explained away by dismissing those involved as idiots. It is a big mistake. The Cult is delighted if its cold calculation is perceived as incompetence and idiocy when it is anything but. Oh, yes, there are idiots within the system – lots of them – but they are *administering* the Cult agenda, mostly unknowingly. They are not deciding and dictating it. The bulwark against tyranny is self-

respect, always has been, always will be. It is self-respect that has broken every tyranny in history. By its very nature self-respect will not bow to oppression and its perpetrators. There is so little self-respect that it's always the few that overturn dictators. Many may eventually follow, but the few with the iron spines (self-respect) kick it off and generate the momentum. The Cult targets self-respect in the knowledge that once this has gone only submission remains. Crazy, contradictory, ever-changing 'Covid' rules are systematically applied by psychologists to delete self-respect. They *want* you to see that the rules make no sense. It is one thing to decide to do something when *you* have made the choice based on evidence and logic. You still retain your self-respect. It is quite another when you can see what you are being told to do is insane, ridiculous and makes no sense, and *yet you still do it*. Your self-respect is extinguished and this has been happening as ever more obviously stupid and nonsensical things have been demanded and the great majority have complied even when they can see they are stupid and nonsensical.

People walk around in face-nappies knowing they are damaging their health and make no difference to a 'virus'. They do it in fear of not doing it. I know it's daft, but I'll do it anyway. When that happens something dies inside of you and submissive reframing has begun. Next there's a need to hide from yourself that you have conceded your self-respect and you convince yourself that you have not really submitted to fear and intimidation. You begin to believe that you are complying with craziness because it's the right thing to do. When first you concede your self-respect of 2+2 = 4 to 2+2 = 5 you *know* you are compromising your self-respect. Gradually to avoid facing that fact you begin to *believe* that 2+2=5. You have been reframed and I have been watching this process happening in the human psyche on an industrial scale. The Cult is working to break your spirit and one of its major tools in that war is humiliation. I read how former American soldier Bradley Manning (later Chelsea Manning after a sex-change) was treated after being jailed for supplying WikiLeaks with documents exposing the enormity of

government and elite mendacity. Manning was isolated in solitary confinement for eight months, put under 24-hour surveillance, forced to hand over clothing before going to bed, and stand naked for every roll call. This is systematic humiliation. The introduction of anal swab 'Covid' tests in China has been done for the same reason to delete self-respect and induce compliant submission. Anal swabs are mandatory for incoming passengers in parts of China and American diplomats have said they were forced to undergo the indignity which would have been calculated humiliation by the Cult-owned Chinese government that has America in its sights.

Government-people: An abusive relationship

Spirit-breaking psychological techniques include giving people hope and apparent respite from tyranny only to take it away again. This happened in the UK during Christmas, 2020, when the psycho-psychologists and their political lackeys announced an easing of restrictions over the holiday only to reimpose them almost immediately on the basis of yet another lie. There is a big psychological difference between getting used to oppression and being given hope of relief only to have that dashed. Psychologists know this and we have seen the technique used repeatedly. Then there is traumatising people before you introduce more extreme regulations that require compliance. A perfect case was the announcement by the dark and sinister Whitty and Vallance in the UK that 'new data' predicted that 4,000 could die every day over the winter of 2020/2021 if we did not lockdown again. I think they call it lying and after traumatising people with that claim out came Jackboot Johnson the next day with new curbs on human freedom. Psychologists know that a frightened and traumatised mind becomes suggestable to submission and behaviour reframing. Underpinning all this has been to make people fearful and suspicious of each other and see themselves as a potential danger to others. In league with deleted self-respect you have the perfect psychological recipe for self-loathing. The relationship between authority and public is now demonstrably the same as that of

subservience to an abusive partner. These are signs of an abusive relationship explained by psychologist Leslie Becker-Phelps:

Psychological and emotional abuse: Undermining a partner's self-worth with verbal attacks, name-calling, and belittling. Humiliating the partner in public, unjustly accusing them of having an affair, or interrogating them about their every behavior. Keeping partner confused or off balance by saying they were just kidding or blaming the partner for 'making' them act this way … Feigning in public that they care while turning against them in private. This leads to victims frequently feeling confused, incompetent, unworthy, hopeless, and chronically self-doubting. [Apply these techniques to how governments have treated the population since New Year, 2020, and the parallels are obvious.]

Physical abuse: The abuser might physically harm their partner in a range of ways, such as grabbing, hitting, punching, or shoving them. They might throw objects at them or harm them with a weapon. [Observe the physical harm imposed by masks, lockdown, and so on.]

Threats and intimidation: One way abusers keep their partners in line is by instilling fear. They might be verbally threatening, or give threatening looks or gestures. Abusers often make it known that they are tracking their partner's every move. They might destroy their partner's possessions, threaten to harm them, or threaten to harm their family members. Not surprisingly, victims of this abuse often feel anxiety, fear, and panic. [No words necessary.]

Isolation: Abusers often limit their partner's activities, forbidding them to talk or interact with friends or family. They might limit access to a car or even turn off their phone. All of this might be done by physically holding them against their will, but is often accomplished through psychological abuse and intimidation. The more isolated a person feels, the fewer resources they have to help gain perspective on their situation and to escape from it. [No words necessary.]

Economic abuse: Abusers often make their partners beholden to them for money by controlling access to funds of any kind. They might prevent their partner from getting a job or withhold access to money they earn from a job. This creates financial dependency that makes leaving the relationship very difficult. [See destruction of livelihoods and the proposed meagre 'guaranteed income' so long as you do whatever you are told.]

Using children: An abuser might disparage their partner's parenting skills, tell their children lies about their partner, threaten to take custody of their children, or threaten to harm their children. These tactics instil fear and often elicit compliance. [See reframed social service mafia and how children are being mercilessly abused by the state over 'Covid' while their parents look on too frightened to do anything.]

A further recurring trait in an abusive relationship is the abused blaming themselves for their abuse and making excuses for the abuser. We have the public blaming each other for lockdown abuse by government and many making excuses for the government while attacking those who challenge the government. How often we have heard authorities say that rules are being imposed or reimposed only because people have refused to 'behave' and follow the rules. We don't want to do it – it's *you*.

Renegade Minds are an antidote to all of these things. They will never concede their self-respect no matter what the circumstances. Even when apparent humiliation is heaped upon them they laugh in its face and reflect back the humiliation on the abuser where it belongs. Renegade Minds will never wear masks they know are only imposed to humiliate, suppress and damage both physically and psychologically. Consequences will take care of themselves and they will never break their spirit or cause them to concede to tyranny. UK newspaper columnist Peter Hitchens was one of the few in the mainstream media to speak out against lockdowns and forced vaccinations. He then announced he had taken the jab. He wanted to see family members abroad and he believed vaccine passports were inevitable even though they had not yet been introduced. Hitchens

has a questioning and critical mind, but not a Renegade one. If he had no amount of pressure would have made him concede. Hitchens excused his action by saying that the battle has been lost. Renegade Minds never accept defeat when freedom is at stake and even if they are the last one standing the self-respect of not submitting to tyranny is more important than any outcome or any consequence.

That's why Renegade Minds are the only minds that ever changed anything worth changing.

CHAPTER EIGHT

'Reframing' insanity

Insanity is relative. It depends on who has who locked in what cage
Ray Bradbury

'Reframing' a mind means simply to change its perception and behaviour. This can be done subconsciously to such an extent that subjects have no idea they have been 'reframed' while to any observer changes in behaviour and attitudes are obvious.

Human society is being reframed on a ginormous scale since the start of 2020 and here we have the reason why psychologists rather than doctors have been calling the shots. Ask most people who have succumbed to 'Covid' reframing if they have changed and most will say 'no'; but they *have* and fundamentally. The Cult's long-game has been preparing for these times since way back and crucial to that has been to prepare both population and officialdom mentally and emotionally. To use the mind-control parlance they had to reframe the population with a mentality that would submit to fascism and reframe those in government and law enforcement to impose fascism or at least go along with it. The result has been the fact-deleted mindlessness of 'Wokeness' and officialdom that has either enthusiastically or unquestioningly imposed global tyranny demanded by reframed politicians on behalf of psychopathic and deeply evil cultists. 'Cognitive reframing' identifies and challenges the way someone sees the world in the form of situations, experiences and emotions and then restructures those perceptions to view the same set of circumstances in a different way. This can have

benefits if the attitudes are personally destructive while on the other side it has the potential for individual and collective mind control which the subject has no idea has even happened.

Cognitive therapy was developed in the 1960s by Aaron T. Beck who was born in Rhode Island in 1921 as the son of Jewish immigrants from the Ukraine. He became interested in the techniques as a treatment for depression. Beck's daughter Judith S. Beck is prominent in the same field and they founded the Beck Institute for Cognitive Behavior Therapy in Philadelphia in 1994. Cognitive reframing, however, began to be used worldwide by those with a very dark agenda. The Cult reframes politicians to change their attitudes and actions until they are completely at odds with what they once appeared to stand for. The same has been happening to government administrators at all levels, law enforcement, military and the human population. Cultists love mind control for two main reasons: It allows them to control what people think, do and say to secure agenda advancement and, by definition, it calms their legendary insecurity and fear of the unexpected. I have studied mind control since the time I travelled America in 1996. I may have been talking to next to no one in terms of an audience in those years, but my goodness did I gather a phenomenal amount of information and knowledge about so many things including the techniques of mind control. I have described this in detail in other books going back to *The Biggest Secret* in 1998. I met a very large number of people recovering from MKUltra and its offshoots and successors and I began to see how these same techniques were being used on the population in general. This was never more obvious than since the 'Covid' hoax began.

Reframing the enforcers

I have observed over the last two decades and more the very clear transformation in the dynamic between the police, officialdom and the public. I tracked this in the books as the relationship mutated from one of serving the public to seeing them as almost the enemy and certainly a lower caste. There has always been a class divide

based on income and always been some psychopathic, corrupt, and big-I-am police officers. This was different. Wholesale change was unfolding in the collective dynamic; it was less about money and far more about position and perceived power. An us-and-them was emerging. Noses were lifted skyward by government administration and law enforcement and their attitude to the public they were *supposed* to be serving changed to one of increasing contempt, superiority and control. The transformation was so clear and widespread that it had to be planned. Collective attitudes and dynamics do not change naturally and organically that quickly on that scale. I then came across an organisation in Britain called Common Purpose created in the late 1980s by Julia Middleton who would work in the office of Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott during the long and disastrous premiership of war criminal Tony Blair. When Blair speaks the Cult is speaking and the man should have been in jail a long time ago. Common Purpose proclaims itself to be one of the biggest 'leadership development' organisations in the world while functioning as a *charity* with all the financial benefits which come from that. It hosts 'leadership development' courses and programmes all over the world and claims to have 'brought together' what it calls 'leaders' from more than 100 countries on six continents. The modus operandi of Common Purpose can be compared with the work of the UK government's reframing network that includes the Behavioural Insights Team 'nudge unit' and 'Covid' reframing specialists at SPI-B. WikiLeaks described Common Purpose long ago as 'a hidden virus in our government and schools' which is unknown to the general public: 'It recruits and trains "leaders" to be loyal to the directives of Common Purpose and the EU, instead of to their own departments, which they then undermine or subvert, the NHS [National Health Service] being an example.' This is a vital point to understand the 'Covid' hoax. The NHS, and its equivalent around the world, has been utterly reframed in terms of administrators and much of the medical personnel with the transformation underpinned by recruitment policies. The outcome has been the criminal and psychopathic behaviour of the

NHS over 'Covid' and we have seen the same in every other major country. WikiLeaks said Common Purpose trainees are 'learning to rule without regard to democracy' and to usher in a police state (current events explained). Common Purpose operated like a 'glue' and had members in the NHS, BBC, police, legal profession, church, many of Britain's 7,000 quangos, local councils, the Civil Service, government ministries and Parliament, and controlled many RDA's (Regional Development Agencies). Here we have one answer for how and why British institutions and their like in other countries have changed so negatively in relation to the public. This further explains how and why the beyond-disgraceful reframed BBC has become a propaganda arm of 'Covid' fascism. They are all part of a network pursuing the same goal.

By 2019 Common Purpose was quoting a figure of 85,000 'leaders' that had attended its programmes. These 'students' of all ages are known as Common Purpose 'graduates' and they consist of government, state and local government officials and administrators, police chiefs and officers, and a whole range of others operating within the national, local and global establishment. Cressida Dick, Commissioner of the London Metropolitan Police, is the Common Purpose graduate who was the 'Gold Commander' that oversaw what can only be described as the murder of Brazilian electrician Jean Charles de Menezes in 2005. He was held down by psychopathic police and shot seven times in the head by a psychopathic lunatic after being mistaken for a terrorist when he was just a bloke going about his day. Dick authorised officers to pursue and keep surveillance on de Menezes and ordered that he be stopped from entering the underground train system. Police psychopaths took her at her word clearly. She was 'disciplined' for this outrage by being *promoted* – eventually to the top of the 'Met' police where she has been a disaster. Many Chief Constables controlling the police in different parts of the UK are and have been Common Purpose graduates. I have heard the 'graduate' network described as a sort of Mafia or secret society operating within the fabric of government at all levels pursuing a collective policy

ingrained at Common Purpose training events. Founder Julia Middleton herself has said:

> Locally and internationally, Common Purpose graduates will be 'lighting small fires' to create change in their organisations and communities … The Common Purpose effect is best illustrated by the many stories of small changes brought about by leaders, who themselves have changed.

A Common Purpose mission statement declared:

> Common Purpose aims to improve the way society works by expanding the vision, decision-making ability and influence of all kinds of leaders. The organisation runs a variety of educational programmes for leaders of all ages, backgrounds and sectors, in order to provide them with the inspirational, information and opportunities they need to change the world.

Yes, but into what? Since 2020 the answer has become clear.

NLP and the Delphi technique

Common Purpose would seem to be a perfect name or would common programming be better? One of the foundation methods of reaching 'consensus' (group think) is by setting the agenda theme and then encouraging, cajoling or pressuring everyone to agree a 'consensus' in line with the core theme promoted by Common Purpose. The methodology involves the 'Delphi technique', or an adaption of it, in which opinions are expressed that are summarised by a 'facilitator or change agent' at each stage. Participants are 'encouraged' to modify their views in the light of what others have said. Stage by stage the former individual opinions are merged into group consensus which just happens to be what Common Purpose wants them to believe. A key part of this is to marginalise anyone refusing to concede to group think and turn the group against them to apply pressure to conform. We are seeing this very technique used on the general population to make 'Covid' group-thinkers hostile to those who have seen through the bullshit. People can be reframed by using perception manipulation methods such as Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP) in which you change perception with the use of

carefully constructed language. An NLP website described the technique this way:

… A method of influencing brain behaviour (the 'neuro' part of the phrase) through the use of language (the 'linguistic' part) and other types of communication to enable a person to 'recode' the way the brain responds to stimuli (that's the 'programming') and manifest new and better behaviours. Neuro-Linguistic Programming often incorporates hypnosis and self-hypnosis to help achieve the change (or 'programming') that is wanted.

British alternative media operation UKColumn has done very detailed research into Common Purpose over a long period. I quoted co-founder and former naval officer Brian Gerrish in my book *Remember Who You Are*, published in 2011, as saying the following years before current times:

It is interesting that many of the mothers who have had children taken by the State speak of the Social Services people being icily cool, emotionless and, as two ladies said in slightly different words, '… like little robots'. We know that NLP is cumulative, so people can be given small imperceptible doses of NLP in a course here, another in a few months, next year etc. In this way, major changes are accrued in their personality, but the day by day change is almost unnoticeable.

In these and other ways 'graduates' have had their perceptions uniformly reframed and they return to their roles in the institutions of government, law enforcement, legal profession, military, 'education', the UK National Health Service and the whole swathe of the establishment structure to pursue a common agenda preparing for the 'post-industrial', 'post-democratic' society. I say 'preparing' but we are now there. 'Post-industrial' is code for the Great Reset and 'post-democratic' is 'Covid' fascism. UKColumn has spoken to partners of those who have attended Common Purpose 'training'. They have described how personalities and attitudes of 'graduates' changed very noticeably for the worse by the time they had completed the course. They had been 'reframed' and told they are the 'leaders' – the special ones – who know better than the population. There has also been the very demonstrable recruitment of psychopaths and narcissists into government administration at all

levels and law enforcement. If you want psychopathy hire psychopaths and you get a simple cause and effect. If you want administrators, police officers and 'leaders' to perceive the public as lesser beings who don't matter then employ narcissists. These personalities are identified using 'psychometrics' that identifies knowledge, abilities, attitudes and personality traits, mostly through carefully-designed questionnaires and tests. As this policy has passed through the decades we have had power-crazy, power-trippers appointed into law enforcement, security and government administration in preparation for current times and the dynamic between public and law enforcement/officialdom has been transformed. UKColumn's Brian Gerrish said of the narcissistic personality:

> Their love of themselves and power automatically means that they will crush others who get in their way. I received a major piece of the puzzle when a friend pointed out that when they made public officials re-apply for their own jobs several years ago they were also required to do psychometric tests. This was undoubtedly the start of the screening process to get 'their' sort of people in post.

How obvious that has been since 2020 although it was clear what was happening long before if people paid attention to the changing public-establishment dynamic.

Change agents

At the centre of events in 'Covid' Britain is the National Health Service (NHS) which has behaved disgracefully in slavishly following the Cult agenda. The NHS management structure is awash with Common Purpose graduates or 'change agents' working to a common cause. Helen Bevan, a Chief of Service Transformation at the NHS Institute for Innovation and Improvement, co-authored a document called 'Towards a million change agents, a review of the social movements literature: implications for large scale change in the NHS'. The document compared a project management approach to that of change and social movements where 'people change

themselves and each other – peer to peer'. Two definitions given for a 'social movement' were:

A group of people who consciously attempt to build a radically new social order; involves people of a broad range of social backgrounds; and deploys politically confrontational and socially disruptive tactics – Cyrus Zirakzadeh 1997

Collective challenges, based on common purposes and social solidarities, in sustained interaction with elites, opponents, and authorities – Sidney Tarrow 1994

Helen Bevan wrote another NHS document in which she defined 'framing' as 'the process by which leaders construct, articulate and put across their message in a powerful and compelling way in order to win people to their cause and call them to action'. I think I could come up with another definition that would be rather more accurate. The National Health Service and institutions of Britain and the wider world have been taken over by reframed 'change agents' and that includes everything from the United Nations to national governments, local councils and social services which have been kidnapping children from loving parents on an extraordinary and gathering scale on the road to the end of parenthood altogether. Children from loving homes are stolen and kidnapped by the state and put into the 'care' (inversion) of the local authority through council homes, foster parents and forced adoption. At the same time children are allowed to be abused without response while many are under council 'care'. UKColumn highlighted the Common Purpose connection between South Yorkshire Police and Rotherham council officers in the case of the scandal in that area of the sexual exploitation of children to which the authorities turned not one blind eye, but both:

We were alarmed to discover that the Chief Executive, the Strategic Director of Children and Young People's Services, the Manager for the Local Strategic Partnership, the Community Cohesion Manager, the Cabinet Member for Cohesion, the Chief Constable and his predecessor had all attended Leadership training courses provided by the pseudo-charity Common Purpose.

Once 'change agents' have secured positions of hire and fire within any organisation things start to move very quickly. Personnel are then hired and fired on the basis of whether they will work towards the agenda the change agent represents. If they do they are rapidly promoted even though they may be incompetent. Those more qualified and skilled who are pre-Common Purpose 'old school' see their careers stall and even disappear. This has been happening for decades in every institution of state, police, 'health' and social services and all of them have been transformed as a result in their attitudes to their jobs and the public. Medical professions, including nursing, which were once vocations for the caring now employ many cold, callous and couldn't give a shit personality types. The UKColumn investigation concluded:

By blurring the boundaries between people, professions, public and private sectors, responsibility and accountability, Common Purpose encourages 'graduates' to believe that as new selected leaders, they can work together, outside of the established political and social structures, to achieve a paradigm shift or CHANGE – so called 'Leading Beyond Authority'. In doing so, the allegiance of the individual becomes 'reframed' on CP colleagues and their NETWORK.

Reframing the Face-Nappies

Nowhere has this process been more obvious than in the police where recruitment of psychopaths and development of unquestioning mind-controlled group-thinkers have transformed law enforcement into a politically-correct 'Woke' joke and a travesty of what should be public service. Today they wear their face-nappies like good little gofers and enforce 'Covid' rules which are fascism under another name. Alongside the specifically-recruited psychopaths we have software minds incapable of free thought. Brian Gerrish again:

An example is the policeman who would not get on a bike for a press photo because he had not done the cycling proficiency course. Normal people say this is political correctness gone mad. Nothing could be further from the truth. The policeman has been reframed, and in his reality it is perfect common sense not to get on the bike 'because he hasn't done the cycling course'.

Another example of this is where the police would not rescue a boy from a pond until they had taken advice from above on the 'risk assessment'. A normal person would have arrived, perhaps thought of the risk for a moment, and dived in. To the police now 'reframed', they followed 'normal' procedure.

There are shocking cases of reframed ambulance crews doing the same. Sheer unthinking stupidity of London Face-Nappies headed by Common Purpose graduate Cressida Dick can be seen in their behaviour at a vigil in March, 2021, for a murdered woman, Sarah Everard. A police officer had been charged with the crime. Anyone with a brain would have left the vigil alone in the circumstances. Instead they 'manhandled' women to stop them breaking 'Covid rules' to betray classic reframing. Minds in the thrall of perception control have no capacity for seeing a situation on its merits and acting accordingly. 'Rules is rules' is their only mind-set. My father used to say that rules and regulations are for the guidance of the intelligent and the blind obedience of the idiot. Most of the intelligent, decent, coppers have gone leaving only the other kind and a few old school for whom the job must be a daily nightmare. The combination of psychopaths and rule-book software minds has been clearly on public display in the 'Covid' era with automaton robots in uniform imposing fascistic 'Covid' regulations on the population without any personal initiative or judging situations on their merits. There are thousands of examples around the world, but I'll make my point with the infamous Derbyshire police in the English East Midlands – the ones who think pouring dye into beauty spots and using drones to track people walking in the countryside away from anyone is called 'policing'. To them there are rules decreed by the government which they have to enforce and in their bewildered state a group gathering in a closed space and someone walking alone in the countryside are the same thing. It is beyond idiocy and enters the realm of clinical insanity.

Police officers in Derbyshire said they were 'horrified' – *horrified* – to find 15 to 20 'irresponsible' kids playing a football match at a closed leisure centre 'in breach of coronavirus restrictions'. When they saw the police the kids ran away leaving their belongings behind and the reframed men and women of Derbyshire police were seeking to establish their identities with a view to fining their parents. The most natural thing for youngsters to do – kicking a ball about – is turned into a criminal activity and enforced by the moronic software programs of Derbyshire police. You find the same mentality in every country. These barely conscious 'horrified' officers said they had to take action because 'we need to ensure these rules are being followed' and 'it is of the utmost importance that you ensure your children are following the rules and regulations for Covid-19'. Had any of them done ten seconds of research to see if this parroting of their masters' script could be supported by any evidence? Nope. Reframed people don't think – others think for them and that's the whole idea of reframing. I have seen police officers one after the other repeating without question word for word what officialdom tells them just as I have seen great swathes of the public doing the same. Ask either for 'their' opinion and out spews what they have been told to think by the official narrative. Police and public may seem to be in different groups, but their mentality is the same. Most people do whatever they are told in fear not doing so or because they believe what officialdom tells them; almost the entirety of the police do what they are told for the same reason. Ultimately it's the tiny inner core of the global Cult that's telling both what to do.

So Derbyshire police were 'horrified'. Oh, really? Why did they think those kids were playing football? It was to relieve the psychological consequences of lockdown and being denied human contact with their friends and interaction, touch and discourse vital to human psychological health. Being denied this month after month has dismantled the psyche of many children and young people as depression and suicide have exploded. Were Derbyshire police *horrified by that*? Are you kidding? Reframed people don't have those

mental and emotional processes that can see how the impact on the psychological health of youngsters is far more dangerous than any 'virus' even if you take the mendacious official figures to be true. The reframed are told (programmed) how to act and so they do. The Derbyshire Chief Constable in the first period of lockdown when the black dye and drones nonsense was going on was Peter Goodman. He was the man who severed the connection between his force and the Derbyshire Constabulary *Male Voice* Choir when he decided that it was not inclusive enough to allow women to join. The fact it was a male voice choir making a particular sound produced by male voices seemed to elude a guy who terrifyingly ran policing in Derbyshire. He retired weeks after his force was condemned as disgraceful by former Supreme Court Justice Jonathan Sumption for their behaviour over extreme lockdown impositions. Goodman was replaced by his deputy Rachel Swann who was in charge when her officers were 'horrified'. The police statement over the boys committing the hanging-offence of playing football included the line about the youngsters being 'irresponsible in the times we are all living through' missing the point that the real relevance of the 'times we are all living through' is the imposition of fascism enforced by psychopaths and reframed minds of police officers playing such a vital part in establishing the fascist tyranny that their own children and grandchildren will have to live in their entire lives. As a definition of insanity that is hard to beat although it might be run close by imposing masks on people that can have a serious effect on their health while wearing a face nappy all day themselves. Once again public and police do it for the same reason – the authorities tell them to and who are they to have the self-respect to say no?

Wokers in uniform

How reframed do you have to be to arrest a *six-year-old* and take him to court for *picking a flower* while waiting for a bus? Brain dead police and officialdom did just that in North Carolina where criminal proceedings happen regularly for children under nine. Attorney Julie Boyer gave the six-year-old crayons and a colouring book

during the 'flower' hearing while the 'adults' decided his fate. County Chief District Court Judge Jay Corpening asked: 'Should a child that believes in Santa Claus, the Easter Bunny and the tooth fairy be making life-altering decisions?' Well, of course not, but common sense has no meaning when you have a common purpose and a reframed mind. Treating children in this way, and police operating in American schools, is all part of the psychological preparation for children to accept a police state as normal all their adult lives. The same goes for all the cameras and biometric tracking technology in schools. Police training is focused on reframing them as snowflake Wokers and this is happening in the military. Pentagon top brass said that 'training sessions on extremism' were needed for troops who asked why they were so focused on the Capitol Building riot when Black Lives Matter riots were ignored. What's the difference between them some apparently and rightly asked. Actually, there is a difference. Five people died in the Capitol riot, only one through violence, and that was a police officer shooting an unarmed protestor. BLM riots killed at least 25 people and cost billions. Asking the question prompted the psychopaths and reframed minds that run the Pentagon to say that more 'education' (programming) was needed. Troop training is all based on psychological programming to make them fodder for the Cult – 'Military men are just dumb, stupid animals to be used as pawns in foreign policy' as Cult-to-his-DNA former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger famously said. Governments see the police in similar terms and it's time for those among them who can see this to defend the people and stop being enforcers of the Cult agenda upon the people.

The US military, like the country itself, is being targeted for destruction through a long list of Woke impositions. Cult-owned gaga 'President' Biden signed an executive order when he took office to allow taxpayer money to pay for transgender surgery for active military personnel and veterans. Are you a man soldier? No, I'm a LGBTQIA+ with a hint of Skoliosexual and Spectrasexual. Oh, good man. Bad choice of words you bigot. The Pentagon announced in March, 2021, the appointment of the first 'diversity and inclusion

officer' for US Special Forces. Richard Torres-Estrada arrived with the publication of a 'D&I Strategic Plan which will guide the enterprise-wide effort to institutionalize and sustain D&I'. If you think a Special Forces 'Strategic Plan' should have something to do with defending America you haven't been paying attention. Defending Woke is now the military's new role. Torres-Estrada has posted images comparing Donald Trump with Adolf Hitler and we can expect no bias from him as a representative of the supposedly non-political Pentagon. Cable news host Tucker Carlson said: 'The Pentagon is now the Yale faculty lounge but with cruise missiles.' Meanwhile Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin, a board member of weapons-maker Raytheon with stock and compensation interests in October, 2020, worth $1.4 million, said he was purging the military of the 'enemy within' – anyone who isn't Woke and supports Donald Trump. Austin refers to his targets as 'racist extremists' while in true Woke fashion being himself a racist extremist. Pentagon documents pledge to 'eradicate, eliminate and conquer all forms of racism, sexism and homophobia'. The definitions of these are decided by 'diversity and inclusion committees' peopled by those who see racism, sexism and homophobia in every situation and opinion. Woke (the Cult) is dismantling the US military and purging testosterone as China expands its military and gives its troops 'masculinity training'. How do we think that is going to end when this is all Cult coordinated? The US military, like the British military, is controlled by Woke and spineless top brass who just go along with it out of personal career interests.

'Woke' means fast asleep

Mind control and perception manipulation techniques used on individuals to create group-think have been unleashed on the global population in general. As a result many have no capacity to see the obvious fascist agenda being installed all around them or what 'Covid' is really all about. Their brains are firewalled like a computer system not to process certain concepts, thoughts and realisations that are bad for the Cult. The young are most targeted as the adults they

will be when the whole fascist global state is planned to be fully implemented. They need to be prepared for total compliance to eliminate all pushback from entire generations. The Cult has been pouring billions into taking complete control of 'education' from schools to universities via its operatives and corporations and not least Bill Gates as always. The plan has been to transform 'education' institutions into programming centres for the mentality of 'Woke'. James McConnell, professor of psychology at the University of Michigan, wrote in *Psychology Today* in 1970:

> The day has come when we can combine sensory deprivation with drugs, hypnosis, and astute manipulation of reward and punishment, to gain almost absolute control over an individual's behaviour. It should then be possible to achieve a very rapid and highly effective type of brainwashing that would allow us to make dramatic changes in a person's behaviour and personality ...
>
> … We should reshape society so that we all would be trained from birth to want to do what society wants us to do. We have the techniques to do it... no-one owns his own personality you acquired, and there's no reason to believe you should have the right to refuse to acquire a new personality if your old one is anti-social.

This was the potential for mass brainwashing in 1970 and the mentality there displayed captures the arrogant psychopathy that drives it forward. I emphasise that not all young people have succumbed to Woke programming and those that haven't are incredibly impressive people given that today's young are the most perceptually-targeted generations in history with all the technology now involved. Vast swathes of the young generations, however, have fallen into the spell – and that's what it is – of Woke. The Woke mentality and perceptual program is founded on *inversion* and you will appreciate later why that is so significant. Everything with Woke is inverted and the opposite of what it is claimed to be. Woke was a term used in African-American culture from the 1900s and referred to an awareness of social and racial justice. This is not the meaning of the modern version or 'New Woke' as I call it in *The Answer*. Oh, no, Woke today means something very different no matter how much Wokers may seek to hide that and insist Old Woke and New

Woke are the same. See if you find any 'awareness of social justice' here in the modern variety:

- Woke demands 'inclusivity' while excluding anyone with a different opinion and calls for mass censorship to silence other views.

- Woke claims to stand against oppression when imposing oppression is the foundation of all that it does. It is the driver of political correctness which is nothing more than a Cult invention to manipulate the population to silence itself.

- Woke believes itself to be 'liberal' while pursuing a global society that can only be described as fascist (see 'anti-fascist' fascist Antifa).

- Woke calls for 'social justice' while spreading injustice wherever it goes against the common 'enemy' which can be easily identified as a differing view.

- Woke is supposed to be a metaphor for 'awake' when it is solid-gold asleep and deep in a Cult-induced coma that meets the criteria for 'off with the fairies'.

I state these points as obvious facts if people only care to look. I don't do this with a sense of condemnation. We need to appreciate that the onslaught of perceptual programming on the young has been incessant and merciless. I can understand why so many have been reframed, or, given their youth, framed from the start to see the world as the Cult demands. The Cult has had access to their minds day after day in its 'education' system for their entire formative years. Perception is formed from information received and the Cult-created system is a life-long download of information delivered to elicit a particular perception, thus behaviour. The more this has expanded into still new extremes in recent decades and ever-increasing censorship has deleted other opinions and information why wouldn't that lead to a perceptual reframing on a mass scale? I

have described already cradle-to-grave programming and in more recent times the targeting of young minds from birth to adulthood has entered the stratosphere. This has taken the form of skewing what is 'taught' to fit the Cult agenda and the omnipresent techniques of group-think to isolate non-believers and pressure them into line. There has always been a tendency to follow the herd, but we really are in a new world now in relation to that. We have parents who can see the 'Covid' hoax told by their children not to stop them wearing masks at school, being 'Covid' tested or having the 'vaccine' in fear of the peer-pressure consequences of being different. What is 'peer-pressure' if not pressure to conform to group-think? Renegade Minds never group-think and always retain a set of perceptions that are unique to them. Group-think is always underpinned by consequences for not group-thinking. Abuse now aimed at those refusing DNA-manipulating 'Covid vaccines' are a potent example of this. The biggest pressure to conform comes from the very group which is itself being manipulated. 'I am programmed to be part of a hive mind and so you must be.'

Woke control structures in 'education' now apply to every mainstream organisation. Those at the top of the 'education' hierarchy (the Cult) decide the policy. This is imposed on governments through the Cult network; governments impose it on schools, colleges and universities; their leadership impose the policy on teachers and academics and they impose it on children and students. At any level where there is resistance, perhaps from a teacher or university lecturer, they are targeted by the authorities and often fired. Students themselves regularly demand the dismissal of academics (increasingly few) at odds with the narrative that the students have been programmed to believe in. It is quite a thought that students who are being targeted by the Cult become so consumed by programmed group-think that they launch protests and demand the removal of those who are trying to push back against those targeting the students. Such is the scale of perceptual inversion. We see this with 'Covid' programming as the Cult imposes the rules via psycho-psychologists and governments on

shops, transport companies and businesses which impose them on their staff who impose them on their customers who pressure Pushbackers to conform to the will of the Cult which is in the process of destroying them and their families. Scan all aspects of society and you will see the same sequence every time.

Fact free Woke and hijacking the 'left'

There is no more potent example of this than 'Woke', a mentality only made possible by the deletion of factual evidence by an 'education' system seeking to produce an ever more uniform society. Why would you bother with facts when you don't know any? Deletion of credible history both in volume and type is highly relevant. Orwell said: 'Who controls the past controls the future: who controls the present controls the past.' They who control the perception of the past control the perception of the future and they who control the present control the perception of the past through the writing and deleting of history. Why would you oppose the imposition of Marxism in the name of Wokeism when you don't know that Marxism cost at least 100 million lives in the 20th century alone? Watch videos and read reports in which Woker generations are asked basic historical questions – it's mind-blowing. A survey of 2,000 people found that six percent of millennials (born approximately early1980s to early 2000s) believed the Second World War (1939-1945) broke out with the assassination of President Kennedy (in 1963) and one in ten thought Margaret Thatcher was British Prime Minister at the time. She was in office between 1979 and 1990. We are in a post-fact society. Provable facts are no defence against the fascism of political correctness or Silicon Valley censorship. Facts don't matter anymore as we have witnessed with the 'Covid' hoax. Sacrificing uniqueness to the Woke group-think religion is all you are required to do and that means thinking for yourself is the biggest Woke no, no. All religions are an expression of group-think and censorship and Woke is just another religion with an orthodoxy defended by group-think and censorship. Burned at

the stake becomes burned on Twitter which leads back eventually to burned at the stake as Woke humanity regresses to ages past.

The biggest Woke inversion of all is its creators and funders. I grew up in a traditional left of centre political household on a council estate in Leicester in the 1950s and 60s – you know, the left that challenged the power of wealth-hoarding elites and threats to freedom of speech and opinion. In those days students went on marches defending freedom of speech while today's Wokers march for its deletion. What on earth could have happened? Those very elites (collectively the Cult) that we opposed in my youth and early life have funded into existence the antithesis of that former left and hijacked the 'brand' while inverting everything it ever stood for. We have a mentality that calls itself 'liberal' and 'progressive' while acting like fascists. Cult billionaires and their corporations have funded themselves into control of 'education' to ensure that Woke programming is unceasing throughout the formative years of children and young people and that non-Wokers are isolated (that word again) whether they be students, teachers or college professors. The Cult has funded into existence the now colossal global network of Woke organisations that have spawned and promoted all the 'causes' on the Cult wish-list for global transformation and turned Wokers into demanders of them. Does anyone really think it's a coincidence that the Cult agenda for humanity is a carbon (sorry) copy of the societal transformations desired by Woke?? These are only some of them:

Political correctness: The means by which the Cult deletes all public debates that it knows it cannot win if we had the free-flow of information and evidence.

Human-caused 'climate change': The means by which the Cult seeks to transform society into a globally-controlled dictatorship imposing its will over the fine detail of everyone's lives 'to save the planet' which doesn't actually need saving.

Transgender obsession: Preparing collective perception to accept the 'new human' which would not have genders because it would be created technologically and not through procreation. I'll have much more on this in Human 2.0.

Race obsession: The means by which the Cult seeks to divide and rule the population by triggering racial division through the perception that society is more racist than ever when the opposite is the case. Is it perfect in that regard? No. But to compare today with the racism of apartheid and segregation brought to an end by the civil rights movement in the 1960s is to insult the memory of that movement and inspirations like Martin Luther King. Why is the 'anti-racism' industry (which it is) so dominated by privileged white people?

White supremacy: This is a label used by privileged white people to demonise poor and deprived white people pushing back on tyranny to marginalise and destroy them. White people are being especially targeted as the dominant race by number within Western society which the Cult seeks to transform in its image. If you want to change a society you must weaken and undermine its biggest group and once you have done that by using the other groups you next turn on them to do the same … 'Then they came for the Jews and I was not a Jew so I did nothing.'

Mass migration: The mass movement of people from the Middle East, Africa and Asia into Europe, from the south into the United States and from Asia into Australia are another way the Cult seeks to dilute the racial, cultural and political influence of white people on Western society. White people ask why their governments appear to be working against them while being politically and culturally biased towards incoming cultures. Well, here's your answer. In the same way sexually 'straight' people, men and women, ask why the

authorities are biased against them in favour of other sexualities. The answer is the same – that's the way the Cult wants it to be for very sinister motives.

These are all central parts of the Cult agenda and central parts of the Woke agenda and Woke was created and continues to be funded to an immense degree by Cult billionaires and corporations. If anyone begins to say 'coincidence' the syllables should stick in their throat.

Billionaire 'social justice warriors'

Joe Biden is a 100 percent-owned asset of the Cult and the Wokers' man in the White House whenever he can remember his name and for however long he lasts with his rapidly diminishing cognitive function. Even walking up the steps of an aircraft without falling on his arse would appear to be a challenge. He's not an empty-shell puppet or anything. From the minute Biden took office (or the Cult did) he began his executive orders promoting the Woke wish-list. You will see the Woke agenda imposed ever more severely because it's really the *Cult* agenda. Woke organisations and activist networks spawned by the Cult are funded to the extreme so long as they promote what the Cult wants to happen. Woke is funded to promote 'social justice' by billionaires who become billionaires by destroying social justice. The social justice mantra is only a cover for dismantling social justice and funded by billionaires that couldn't give a damn about social justice. Everything makes sense when you see that. One of Woke's premier funders is Cult billionaire financier George Soros who said: 'I am basically there to make money, I cannot and do not look at the social consequences of what I do.' This is the same Soros who has given more than $32 billion to his Open Society Foundations global Woke network and funded Black Lives Matter, mass immigration into Europe and the United States, transgender activism, climate change activism, political correctness and groups targeting 'white supremacy' in the form of privileged white thugs that dominate Antifa. What a scam it all is and when

you are dealing with the unquestioning fact-free zone of Woke scamming them is child's play. All you need to pull it off in all these organisations are a few in-the-know agents of the Cult and an army of naïve, reframed, uninformed, narcissistic, know-nothings convinced of their own self-righteousness, self-purity and virtue.

Soros and fellow billionaires and billionaire corporations have poured hundreds of millions into Black Lives Matter and connected groups and promoted them to a global audience. None of this is motivated by caring about black people. These are the billionaires that have controlled and exploited a system that leaves millions of black people in abject poverty and deprivation which they do absolutely nothing to address. The same Cult networks funding BLM were behind the *slave trade!* Black Lives Matter hijacked a phrase that few would challenge and they have turned this laudable concept into a political weapon to divide society. You know that BLM is a fraud when it claims that *All* Lives Matter, the most inclusive statement of all, is 'racist'. BLM and its Cult masters don't want to end racism. To them it's a means to an end to control all of humanity never mind the colour, creed, culture or background. What has destroying the nuclear family got to do with ending racism? Nothing – but that is one of the goals of BLM and also happens to be a goal of the Cult as I have been exposing in my books for decades. Stealing children from loving parents and giving schools ever more power to override parents is part of that same agenda. BLM is a Marxist organisation and why would that not be the case when the Cult created Marxism *and* BLM? Patrisse Cullors, a BLM co-founder, said in a 2015 video that she and her fellow organisers, including co-founder Alicia Garza, are 'trained Marxists'. The lady known after marriage as Patrisse Khan-Cullors bought a $1.4 million home in 2021 in one of the whitest areas of California with a black population of just 1.6 per cent and has so far bought *four* high-end homes for a total of $3.2 million. How very Marxist. There must be a bit of spare in the BLM coffers, however, when Cult corporations and billionaires have handed over the best part of $100 million. Many black people can see that Black Lives Matter is not

working for them, but against them, and this is still more confirmation. Black journalist Jason Whitlock, who had his account suspended by Twitter for simply linking to the story about the 'Marxist's' home buying spree, said that BLM leaders are 'making millions of dollars off the backs of these dead black men who they wouldn't spit on if they were on fire and alive'.

Black Lies Matter

Cult assets and agencies came together to promote BLM in the wake of the death of career criminal George Floyd who had been jailed a number of times including for forcing his way into the home of a black woman with others in a raid in which a gun was pointed at her stomach. Floyd was filmed being held in a Minneapolis street in 2020 with the knee of a police officer on his neck and he subsequently died. It was an appalling thing for the officer to do, but the same technique has been used by police on peaceful protestors of lockdown without any outcry from the Woke brigade. As unquestioning supporters of the Cult agenda Wokers have supported lockdown and all the 'Covid' claptrap while attacking anyone standing up to the tyranny imposed in its name. Court documents would later include details of an autopsy on Floyd by County Medical Examiner Dr Andrew Baker who concluded that Floyd had taken a fatal level of the drug fentanyl. None of this mattered to fact-free, question-free, Woke. Floyd's death was followed by worldwide protests against police brutality amid calls to defund the police. Throwing babies out with the bathwater is a Woke speciality. In the wake of the murder of British woman Sarah Everard a Green Party member of the House of Lords, Baroness Jones of Moulescoomb (Nincompoopia would have been better), called for a 6pm curfew for all men. This would be in breach of the Geneva Conventions on war crimes which ban collective punishment, but that would never have crossed the black and white Woke mind of Baroness Nincompoopia who would have been far too convinced of her own self-righteousness to compute such details. Many American cities did defund the police in the face of Floyd riots

and after $15 million was deleted from the police budget in Washington DC under useless Woke mayor Muriel Bowser car-jacking alone rose by 300 percent and within six months the US capital recorded its highest murder rate in 15 years. The same happened in Chicago and other cities in line with the Cult/Soros plan to bring fear to streets and neighbourhoods by reducing the police, releasing violent criminals and not prosecuting crime. This is the mob-rule agenda that I have warned in the books was coming for so long. Shootings in the area of Minneapolis where Floyd was arrested increased by 2,500 percent compared with the year before. Defunding the police over George Floyd has led to a big increase in dead people with many of them black. Police protection for politicians making these decisions stayed the same or increased as you would expect from professional hypocrites. The Cult doesn't actually want to abolish the police. It wants to abolish local control over the police and hand it to federal government as the psychopaths advance the Hunger Games Society. Many George Floyd protests turned into violent riots with black stores and businesses destroyed by fire and looting across America fuelled by Black Lives Matter. Woke doesn't do irony. If you want civil rights you must loot the liquor store and the supermarket and make off with a smart TV. It's the only way.

It's not a race war – it's a class war

Black people are patronised by privileged blacks and whites alike and told they are victims of white supremacy. I find it extraordinary to watch privileged blacks supporting the very system and bloodline networks behind the slave trade and parroting the same Cult-serving manipulative crap of their privileged white, often billionaire, associates. It is indeed not a race war but a class war and colour is just a diversion. Black Senator Cory Booker and black Congresswoman Maxine Waters, more residents of Nincompoopia, personify this. Once you tell people they are victims of someone else you devalue both their own responsibility for their plight and the power they have to impact on their reality and experience. Instead

we have: 'You are only in your situation because of whitey – turn on them and everything will change.' It won't change. Nothing changes in our lives unless *we* change it. Crucial to that is never seeing yourself as a victim and always as the creator of your reality. Life is a simple sequence of choice and consequence. Make different choices and you create different consequences. *You* have to make those choices – not Black Lives Matter, the Woke Mafia and anyone else that seeks to dictate your life. Who are they these Wokers, an emotional and psychological road traffic accident, to tell you what to do? Personal empowerment is the last thing the Cult and its Black Lives Matter want black people or anyone else to have. They claim to be defending the underdog while *creating* and perpetuating the underdog. The Cult's worst nightmare is human unity and if they are going to keep blacks, whites and every other race under economic servitude and control then the focus must be diverted from what they have in common to what they can be manipulated to believe divides them. Blacks have to be told that their poverty and plight is the fault of the white bloke living on the street in the same poverty and with the same plight they are experiencing. The difference is that your plight black people is due to him, a white supremacist with 'white privilege' living on the street. Don't unite as one human family against your mutual oppressors and suppressors – fight the oppressor with the white face who is as financially deprived as you are. The Cult knows that as its 'Covid' agenda moves into still new levels of extremism people are going to respond and it has been spreading the seeds of disunity everywhere to stop a united response to the evil that targets *all of us*.

Racist attacks on 'whiteness' are getting ever more outrageous and especially through the American Democratic Party which has an appalling history for anti-black racism. Barack Obama, Joe Biden, Hillary Clinton and Nancy Pelosi all eulogised about Senator Robert Byrd at his funeral in 2010 after a nearly 60-year career in Congress. Byrd was a brutal Ku Klux Klan racist and a violent abuser of Cathy O'Brien in MKUltra. He said he would never fight in the military 'with a negro by my side' and 'rather I should die a thousand times,

and see Old Glory trampled in the dirt never to rise again, than to see this beloved land of ours become degraded by race mongrels, a throwback to the blackest specimen from the wilds'. Biden called Byrd a 'very close friend and mentor'. These 'Woke' hypocrites are not anti-racist they are anti-poor and anti-people not of their perceived class. Here is an illustration of the scale of anti-white racism to which we have now descended. Seriously Woke and moronic *New York Times* contributor Damon Young described whiteness as a 'virus' that 'like other viruses will not die until there are no bodies left for it to infect'. He went on: '… the only way to stop it is to locate it, isolate it, extract it, and kill it.' Young can say that as a black man with no consequences when a white man saying the same in reverse would be facing a jail sentence. *That's* racism. We had super-Woke numbskull senators Tammy Duckworth and Mazie Hirono saying they would object to future Biden Cabinet appointments if he did not nominate more Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders. Never mind the ability of the candidate what do they look like? Duckworth said: 'I will vote for racial minorities and I will vote for LGBTQ, but anyone else I'm not voting for.' Appointing people on the grounds of race is illegal, but that was not a problem for this ludicrous pair. They were on-message and that's a free pass in any situation.

Critical race racism

White children are told at school they are intrinsically racist as they are taught the divisive 'critical race theory'. This claims that the law and legal institutions are inherently racist and that race is a socially constructed concept used by white people to further their economic and political interests at the expense of people of colour. White is a 'virus' as we've seen. Racial inequality results from 'social, economic, and legal differences that white people create between races to maintain white interests which leads to poverty and criminality in minority communities'. I must tell that to the white guy sleeping on the street. The principal of East Side Community School in New York sent white parents a manifesto that called on

them to become 'white traitors' and advocate for full 'white abolition'. These people are teaching your kids when they urgently need a psychiatrist. The 'school' included a chart with 'eight white identities' that ranged from 'white supremacist' to 'white abolition' and defined the behaviour white people must follow to end 'the regime of whiteness'. Woke blacks and their privileged white associates are acting exactly like the slave owners of old and Ku Klux Klan racists like Robert Byrd. They are too full of their own self-purity to see that, but it's true. Racism is not a body type; it's a state of mind that can manifest through any colour, creed or culture.

Another racial fraud is *'equity'*. Not equality of treatment and opportunity – equity. It's a term spun as equality when it means something very different. Equality in its true sense is a raising up while 'equity' is a race to the bottom. Everyone in the same level of poverty is 'equity'. Keep everyone down – that's equity. The Cult doesn't want anyone in the human family to be empowered and BLM leaders, like all these 'anti-racist' organisations, continue their privileged, pampered existence by perpetuating the perception of gathering racism. When is the last time you heard an 'anti-racist' or 'anti-Semitism' organisation say that acts of racism and discrimination have *fallen?* It's not in the interests of their fund-raising and power to influence and the same goes for the professional soccer anti-racism operation, Kick It Out. Two things confirmed that the Black Lives Matter riots in the summer of 2020 were Cult creations. One was that while anti-lockdown protests were condemned in this same period for 'transmitting 'Covid' the authorities supported mass gatherings of Black Lives Matter supporters. I even saw self-deluding people claiming to be doctors say the two types of protest were not the same. No – the non-existent 'Covid' was in favour of lockdowns and attacked those that protested against them while 'Covid' supported Black Lives Matter and kept well away from its protests. The whole thing was a joke and as lockdown protestors were arrested, often brutally, by reframed Face-Nappies we had the grotesque sight of police officers taking the knee to Black Lives Matter, a Cult-funded Marxist

organisation that supports violent riots and wants to destroy the nuclear family and white people.

He's not white? Shucks!

Woke obsession with race was on display again when ten people were shot dead in Boulder, Colorado, in March, 2021. Cult-owned Woke TV channels like CNN said the shooter appeared to be a white man and Wokers were on Twitter condemning 'violent white men' with the usual mantras. Then the shooter's name was released as Ahmad Al Aliwi Alissa, an anti-Trump Arab-American, and the sigh of disappointment could be heard five miles away. Never mind that ten people were dead and what that meant for their families. Race baiting was all that mattered to these sick Cult-serving people like Barack Obama who exploited the deaths to further divide America on racial grounds which is his job for the Cult. This is the man that 'racist' white Americans made the first black president of the United States and then gave him a second term. Not-very-bright Obama has become filthy rich on the back of that and today appears to have a big influence on the Biden administration. Even so he's still a downtrodden black man and a victim of white supremacy. This disingenuous fraud reveals the contempt he has for black people when he puts on a Deep South Alabama accent whenever he talks to them, no, *at* them.

Another BLM red flag was how the now fully-Woke (fully-Cult) and fully-virtue-signalled professional soccer authorities had their teams taking the knee before every match in support of Marxist Black Lives Matter. Soccer authorities and clubs displayed 'Black Lives Matter' on the players' shirts and flashed the name on electronic billboards around the pitch. Any fans that condemned what is a Freemasonic taking-the-knee ritual were widely condemned as you would expect from the Woke virtue-signallers of professional sport and the now fully-Woke media. We have reverse racism in which you are banned from criticising any race or culture except for white people for whom anything goes – say what you like, no problem. What has this got to do with racial harmony and

equality? We've had black supremacists from Black Lives Matter telling white people to fall to their knees in the street and apologise for their white supremacy. Black supremacists acting like white supremacist slave owners of the past couldn't breach their self-obsessed, race-obsessed sense of self-purity. Joe Biden appointed a race-obsessed black supremacist Kristen Clarke to head the Justice Department Civil Rights Division. Clarke claimed that blacks are endowed with 'greater mental, physical and spiritual abilities' than whites. If anyone reversed that statement they would be vilified. Clarke is on-message so no problem. She's never seen a black-white situation in which the black figure is anything but a virtuous victim and she heads the Civil Rights Division which should treat everyone the same or it isn't civil rights. Another perception of the Renegade Mind: If something or someone is part of the Cult agenda they will be supported by Woke governments and media no matter what. If they're not, they will be condemned and censored. It really is that simple and so racist Clarke prospers despite (make that because of) her racism.

The end of culture

Biden's administration is full of such racial, cultural and economic bias as the Cult requires the human family to be divided into warring factions. We are now seeing racially-segregated graduations and everything, but everything, is defined through the lens of perceived 'racism. We have 'racist' mathematics, 'racist' food and even 'racist' *plants*. World famous Kew Gardens in London said it was changing labels on plants and flowers to tell its pre-'Covid' more than two million visitors a year how racist they are. Kew director Richard Deverell said this was part of an effort to 'move quickly to decolonise collections' after they were approached by one Ajay Chhabra 'an actor with an insight into how sugar cane was linked to slavery'. They are *plants* you idiots. 'Decolonisation' in the Woke manual really means colonisation of society with its mentality and by extension colonisation by the Cult. We are witnessing a new Chinese-style 'Cultural Revolution' so essential to the success of all

Marxist takeovers. Our cultural past and traditions have to be swept away to allow a new culture to be built-back-better. Woke targeting of long-standing Western cultural pillars including historical monuments and cancelling of historical figures is what happened in the Mao revolution in China which 'purged remnants of capitalist and traditional elements from Chinese society' and installed Maoism as the dominant ideology'. For China see the Western world today and for 'dominant ideology' see Woke. Better still see Marxism or Maoism. The 'Covid' hoax has specifically sought to destroy the arts and all elements of Western culture from people meeting in a pub or restaurant to closing theatres, music venues, sports stadiums, places of worship and even banning *singing*. Destruction of Western society is also why criticism of any religion is banned except for Christianity which again is the dominant religion as white is the numerically-dominant race. Christianity may be fading rapidly, but its history and traditions are weaved through the fabric of Western society. Delete the pillars and other structures will follow until the whole thing collapses. I am not a Christian defending that religion when I say that. I have no religion. It's just a fact. To this end Christianity has itself been turned Woke to usher its own downfall and its ranks are awash with 'change agents' – knowing and unknowing – at every level including Pope Francis (*definitely* knowing) and the clueless Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby (possibly not, but who can be sure?). Woke seeks to coordinate attacks on Western culture, traditions, and ways of life through 'intersectionality' defined as 'the complex, cumulative way in which the effects of multiple forms of discrimination (such as racism, sexism, and classism) combine, overlap, or intersect especially in the experiences of marginalised individuals or groups'. Wade through the Orwellian Woke-speak and this means coordinating disparate groups in a common cause to overthrow freedom and liberal values.

The entire structure of public institutions has been infested with Woke – government at all levels, political parties, police, military, schools, universities, advertising, media and trade unions. This abomination has been achieved through the Cult web by appointing

Wokers to positions of power and battering non-Wokers into line through intimidation, isolation and threats to their job. Many have been fired in the wake of the empathy-deleted, vicious hostility of 'social justice' Wokers and the desire of gutless, spineless employers to virtue-signal their Wokeness. Corporations are filled with Wokers today, most notably those in Silicon Valley. Ironically at the top they are not Woke at all. They are only exploiting the mentality their Cult masters have created and funded to censor and enslave while the Wokers cheer them on until it's their turn. Thus the Woke 'liberal left' is an inversion of the traditional liberal left. Campaigning for justice on the grounds of power and wealth distribution has been replaced by campaigning for identity politics. The genuine traditional left would never have taken money from today's billionaire abusers of fairness and justice and nor would the billionaires have wanted to fund that genuine left. It would not have been in their interests to do so. The division of opinion in those days was between the haves and have nots. This all changed with Cult manipulated and funded identity politics. The division of opinion today is between Wokers and non-Wokers and not income brackets. Cult corporations and their billionaires may have taken wealth disparity to cataclysmic levels of injustice, but as long as they speak the language of Woke, hand out the dosh to the Woke network and censor the enemy they are 'one of us'. Billionaires who don't give a damn about injustice are laughing at them till their bellies hurt. Wokers are not even close to self-aware enough to see that. The transformed 'left' dynamic means that Wokers who drone on about 'social justice' are funded by billionaires that have destroyed social justice the world over. It's *why* they are billionaires.

The climate con

Nothing encapsulates what I have said more comprehensively than the hoax of human-caused global warming. I have detailed in my books over the years how Cult operatives and organisations were the pump-primers from the start of the climate con. A purpose-built vehicle for this is the Club of Rome established by the Cult in 1968

with the Rockefellers and Rothschilds centrally involved all along. Their gofer frontman Maurice Strong, a Canadian oil millionaire, hosted the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in 1992 where the global 'green movement' really expanded in earnest under the guiding hand of the Cult. The Earth Summit established Agenda 21 through the Cult-created-and-owned United Nations to use the illusion of human-caused climate change to justify the transformation of global society to save the world from climate disaster. It is a No-Problem-Reaction-Solution sold through governments, media, schools and universities as whole generations have been terrified into believing that the world was going to end in their lifetimes unless what old people had inflicted upon them was stopped by a complete restructuring of how everything is done. Chill, kids, it's all a hoax. Such restructuring is precisely what the Cult agenda demands (purely by coincidence of course). Today this has been given the codename of the Great Reset which is only an updated term for Agenda 21 and its associated Agenda 2030. The latter, too, is administered through the UN and was voted into being by the General Assembly in 2015. Both 21 and 2030 seek centralised control of all resources and food right down to the raindrops falling on your own land. These are some of the demands of Agenda 21 established in 1992. See if you recognise this society emerging today:

- End national sovereignty
- State planning and management of all land resources, ecosystems, deserts, forests, mountains, oceans and fresh water; agriculture; rural development; biotechnology; and ensuring *'equity'*
- The state to 'define the role' of business and financial resources
- Abolition of private property
- 'Restructuring' the family unit (see BLM)
- Children raised by the state
- People told what their job will be
- Major restrictions on movement
- Creation of 'human settlement zones'

- Mass resettlement as people are forced to vacate land where they live
- Dumbing down education
- Mass global depopulation in pursuit of all the above

The United Nations was created as a Trojan horse for world government. With the climate con of critical importance to promoting that outcome you would expect the UN to be involved. Oh, it's involved all right. The UN is promoting Agenda 21 and Agenda 2030 justified by 'climate change' while also driving the climate hoax through its Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), one of the world's most corrupt organisations. The IPCC has been lying ferociously and constantly since the day it opened its doors with the global media hanging unquestioningly on its every mendacious word. The Green movement is entirely Woke and has long lost its original environmental focus since it was co-opted by the Cult. An obsession with 'global warming' has deleted its values and scrambled its head. I experienced a small example of what I mean on a beautiful country walk that I have enjoyed several times a week for many years. The path merged into the fields and forests and you felt at one with the natural world. Then a 'Green' organisation, the Hampshire and Isle of Wight Wildlife Trust, took over part of the land and proceeded to cut down a large number of trees, including mature ones, to install a horrible big, bright steel 'this-is-ours-stay-out' fence that destroyed the whole atmosphere of this beautiful place. No one with a feel for nature would do that. Day after day I walked to the sound of chainsaws and a magnificent mature weeping willow tree that I so admired was cut down at the base of the trunk. When I challenged a Woke young girl in a green shirt (of course) about this vandalism she replied: 'It's a weeping willow – it will grow back.' This is what people are paying for when they donate to the Hampshire and Isle of Wight Wildlife Trust and many other 'green' organisations today. It is not the environmental movement that I knew and instead has become a support-system – as with Extinction Rebellion – for a very dark agenda.

Private jets for climate justice

The Cult-owned, Gates-funded, World Economic Forum and its founder Klaus Schwab were behind the emergence of Greta Thunberg to harness the young behind the climate agenda and she was invited to speak to the world at … the UN. Schwab published a book, *Covid-19: The Great Reset* in 2020 in which he used the 'Covid' hoax and the climate hoax to lay out a new society straight out of Agenda 21 and Agenda 2030. Bill Gates followed in early 2021 when he took time out from destroying the world to produce a book in his name about the way to save it. Gates flies across the world in private jets and admitted that 'I probably have one of the highest greenhouse gas footprints of anyone on the planet … my personal flying alone is gigantic.' He has also bid for the planet's biggest private jet operator. Other climate change saviours who fly in private jets include John Kerry, the US Special Presidential Envoy for Climate, and actor Leonardo DiCaprio, a 'UN Messenger of Peace with special focus on climate change'. These people are so full of bullshit they could corner the market in manure. We mustn't be sceptical, though, because the Gates book, *How to Avoid a Climate Disaster: The Solutions We Have and the Breakthroughs We Need*, is a genuine attempt to protect the world and not an obvious pile of excrement attributed to a mega-psychopath aimed at selling his masters' plans for humanity. The Gates book and the other shite-pile by Klaus Schwab could have been written by the same person and may well have been. Both use 'climate change' and 'Covid' as the excuses for their new society and by coincidence the Cult's World Economic Forum and Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation promote the climate hoax and hosted Event 201 which pre-empted with a 'simulation' the very 'coronavirus' hoax that would be simulated for real on humanity within weeks. The British 'royal' family is promoting the 'Reset' as you would expect through Prince 'climate change caused the war in Syria' Charles and his hapless son Prince William who said that we must 'reset our relationship with nature and our trajectory as a species' to avoid a climate disaster. Amazing how many promotors of the 'Covid' and 'climate change' control

systems are connected to Gates and the World Economic Forum. A 'study' in early 2021 claimed that carbon dioxide emissions must fall by the equivalent of a global lockdown roughly every two years for the next decade to save the planet. The 'study' appeared in the same period that the Schwab mob claimed in a video that lockdowns destroying the lives of billions are good because they make the earth 'quieter' with less 'ambient noise'. They took down the video amid a public backlash for such arrogant, empathy-deleted stupidity You see, however, where they are going with this. Corinne Le Quéré, a professor at the Tyndall Centre for Climate Change Research, University of East Anglia, was lead author of the climate lockdown study, and she writes for … the World Economic Forum. Gates calls in 'his' book for changing 'every aspect of the economy' (long-time Cult agenda) and for humans to eat synthetic 'meat' (predicted in my books) while cows and other farm animals are eliminated. Australian TV host and commentator Alan Jones described what carbon emission targets would mean for farm animals in Australia alone if emissions were reduced as demanded by 35 percent by 2030 and zero by 2050:

Well, let's take agriculture, the total emissions from agriculture are about 75 million tonnes of carbon dioxide, equivalent. Now reduce that by 35 percent and you have to come down to 50 million tonnes, I've done the maths. So if you take for example 1.5 million cows, you're going to have to reduce the herd by 525,000 [by] 2030, nine years, that's 58,000 cows a year. The beef herd's 30 million, reduce that by 35 percent, that's 10.5 million, which means 1.2 million cattle have to go every year between now and 2030. This is insanity!

There are 75 million sheep. Reduce that by 35 percent, that's 26 million sheep, that's almost 3 million a year. So under the Paris Agreement over 30 million beasts. dairy cows, cattle, pigs and sheep would go. More than 8,000 every minute of every hour for the next decade, do these people know what they're talking about?

Clearly they don't at the level of campaigners, politicians and administrators. The Cult *does* know; that's the outcome it wants. We are faced with not just a war on humanity. Animals and the natural world are being targeted and I have been saying since the 'Covid' hoax began that the plan eventually was to claim that the 'deadly virus' is able to jump from animals, including farm animals and

domestic pets, to humans. Just before this book went into production came this story: 'Russia registers world's first Covid-19 vaccine for cats & dogs as makers of Sputnik V warn pets & farm animals could spread virus'. The report said 'top scientists warned that the deadly pathogen could soon begin spreading through homes and farms' and 'the next stage is the infection of farm and domestic animals'. Know the outcome and you'll see the journey. Think what that would mean for animals and keep your eye on a term called zoonosis or zoonotic diseases which transmit between animals and humans. The Cult wants to break the connection between animals and people as it does between people and people. Farm animals fit with the Cult agenda to transform food from natural to synthetic.

The gas of life is killing us

There can be few greater examples of Cult inversion than the condemnation of carbon dioxide as a dangerous pollutant when it is the gas of life. Without it the natural world would be dead and so we would all be dead. We breathe in oxygen and breathe out carbon dioxide while plants produce oxygen and absorb carbon dioxide. It is a perfect symbiotic relationship that the Cult wants to dismantle for reasons I will come to in the final two chapters. Gates, Schwab, other Cult operatives and mindless repeaters, want the world to be 'carbon neutral' by at least 2050 and the earlier the better. 'Zero carbon' is the cry echoed by lunatics calling for 'Zero Covid' when we already have it. These carbon emission targets will deindustrialise the world in accordance with Cult plans – the post-industrial, post-democratic society – and with so-called renewables like solar and wind not coming even close to meeting human energy needs blackouts and cold are inevitable. Texans got the picture in the winter of 2021 when a snow storm stopped wind turbines and solar panels from working and the lights went down along with water which relies on electricity for its supply system. Gates wants everything to be powered by electricity to ensure that his masters have the kill switch to stop all human activity, movement, cooking, water and warmth any time they like. The climate lie is so

stupendously inverted that it claims we must urgently reduce carbon dioxide when we *don't have enough*.

Co2 in the atmosphere is a little above 400 parts per million when the optimum for plant growth is 2,000 ppm and when it falls anywhere near 150 ppm the natural world starts to die and so do we. It fell to as low as 280 ppm in an 1880 measurement in Hawaii and rose to 413 ppm in 2019 with industrialisation which is why the planet has become *greener* in the industrial period. How insane then that psychopathic madman Gates is not satisfied only with blocking the rise of Co2. He's funding technology to suck it out of the atmosphere. The reason why will become clear. The industrial era is not destroying the world through Co2 and has instead turned around a potentially disastrous ongoing fall in Co2. Greenpeace co-founder and scientist Patrick Moore walked away from Greenpeace in 1986 and has exposed the green movement for fear-mongering and lies. He said that 500 million years ago there was *17 times* more Co2 in the atmosphere than we have today and levels have been falling for hundreds of millions of years. In the last 150 million years Co2 levels in Earth's atmosphere had reduced by *90 percent*. Moore said that by the time humanity began to unlock carbon dioxide from fossil fuels we were at '38 seconds to midnight' and in that sense: 'Humans are [the Earth's] salvation.' Moore made the point that only half the Co2 emitted by fossil fuels stays in the atmosphere and we should remember that all pollution pouring from chimneys that we are told is carbon dioxide is in fact nothing of the kind. It's pollution. Carbon dioxide is an invisible gas.

William Happer, Professor of Physics at Princeton University and long-time government adviser on climate, has emphasised the Co2 deficiency for maximum growth and food production. Greenhouse growers don't add carbon dioxide for a bit of fun. He said that most of the warming in the last 100 years, after the earth emerged from the super-cold period of the 'Little Ice Age' into a natural warming cycle, was over by 1940. Happer said that a peak year for warming in 1988 can be explained by a 'monster El Nino' which is a natural and cyclical warming of the Pacific that has nothing to do with 'climate

change'. He said the effect of Co2 could be compared to painting a wall with red paint in that once two or three coats have been applied it didn't matter how much more you slapped on because the wall will not get much redder. Almost all the effect of the rise in Co2 has already happened, he said, and the volume in the atmosphere would now have to *double* to increase temperature by a single degree. Climate hoaxers know this and they have invented the most ridiculously complicated series of 'feedback' loops to try to overcome this rather devastating fact. You hear puppet Greta going on cluelessly about feedback loops and this is why.

The Sun affects temperature? No you *climate denier*

Some other nonsense to contemplate: Climate graphs show that rises in temperature do not follow rises in Co2 – *it's the other way round* with a lag between the two of some 800 years. If we go back 800 years from present time we hit the Medieval Warm Period when temperatures were higher than now without any industrialisation and this was followed by the Little Ice Age when temperatures plummeted. The world was still emerging from these centuries of serious cold when many climate records began which makes the ever-repeated line of the 'hottest year since records began' meaningless when you are not comparing like with like. The coldest period of the Little Ice Age corresponded with the lowest period of sunspot activity when the Sun was at its least active. Proper scientists will not be at all surprised by this when it confirms the obvious fact that earth temperature is affected by the scale of Sun activity and the energetic power that it subsequently emits; but when is the last time you heard a climate hoaxer talking about the Sun as a source of earth temperature?? Everything has to be focussed on Co2 which makes up just 0.117 percent of so-called greenhouse gases and only a fraction of even that is generated by human activity. The rest is natural. More than *90 percent* of those greenhouse gases are water vapour and clouds (Fig 9). Ban moisture I say. Have you noticed that the climate hoaxers no longer use the polar bear as their promotion image? That's because far from becoming extinct polar

bear communities are stable or thriving. Joe Bastardi, American meteorologist, weather forecaster and outspoken critic of the climate lie, documents in his book *The Climate Chronicles* how weather patterns and events claimed to be evidence of climate change have been happening since long before industrialisation: 'What happened before naturally is happening again, as is to be expected given the cyclical nature of the climate due to the design of the planet.' If you read the detailed background to the climate hoax in my other books you will shake your head and wonder how anyone could believe the crap which has spawned a multi-trillion dollar industry based on absolute garbage (see HIV causes AIDs and Sars-Cov-2 causes 'Covid-19'). Climate and 'Covid' have much in common given they have the same source. They both have the contradictory *everything* factor in which everything is explained by reference to them. It's hot – 'it's climate change'. It's cold – 'it's climate change'. I got a sniffle – 'it's Covid'. I haven't got a sniffle – 'it's Covid'. Not having a sniffle has to be a symptom of 'Covid'. Everything is and not having a sniffle is especially dangerous if you are a slow walker. For sheer audacity I offer you a Cambridge University 'study' that actually linked 'Covid' to 'climate change'. It had to happen eventually. They concluded that climate change played a role in 'Covid-19' spreading from animals to humans because … wait for it … I kid you not … *the two groups were forced closer together as populations grow*. Er, that's it. The whole foundation on which this depended was that 'Bats are the likely zoonotic origin of SARS-CoV-1 and SARS-CoV-2'. Well, they are not. They are nothing to do with it. Apart from bats not being the origin and therefore 'climate change' effects on bats being irrelevant I am in awe of their academic insight. Where would we be without them? Not where we are that's for sure.

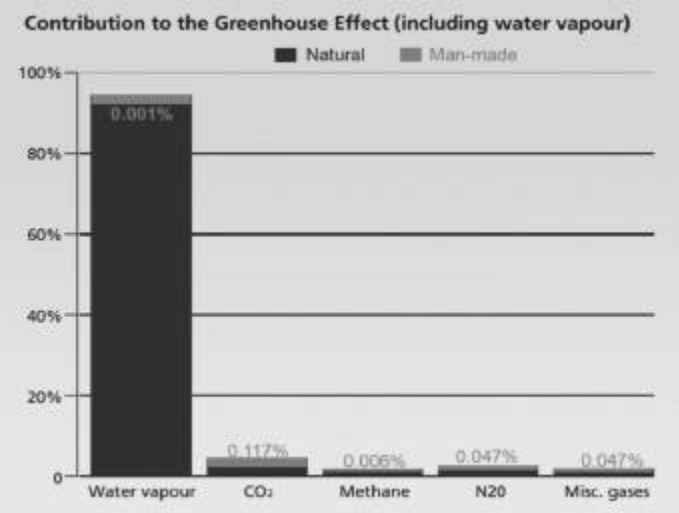

Figure 9: The idea that the gas of life is disastrously changing the climate is an insult to brain cell activity.

One other point about the weather is that climate modification is now well advanced and not every major weather event is natural – or earthquake come to that. I cover this subject at some length in other books. China is openly planning a rapid expansion of its weather modification programme which includes changing the climate in an area more than one and a half times the size of India. China used weather manipulation to ensure clear skies during the 2008 Olympics in Beijing. I have quoted from US military documents detailing how to employ weather manipulation as a weapon of war and they did that in the 1960s and 70s during the conflict in Vietnam with Operation Popeye manipulating monsoon rains for military purposes. Why would there be international treaties on weather modification if it wasn't possible? Of course it is. Weather is energetic information and it can be changed.

How was the climate hoax pulled off? See 'Covid'

If you can get billions to believe in a 'virus' that doesn't exist you can get them to believe in human-caused climate change that doesn't exist. Both are being used by the Cult to transform global society in the way it has long planned. Both hoaxes have been achieved in pretty much the same way. First you declare a lie is a fact. There's a

'virus' you call SARS-Cov-2 or humans are warming the planet with their behaviour. Next this becomes, via Cult networks, the foundation of government, academic and science policy and belief. Those who parrot the mantra are given big grants to produce research that confirms the narrative is true and ever more 'symptoms' are added to make the 'virus'/'climate change' sound even more scary. Scientists and researchers who challenge the narrative have their grants withdrawn and their careers destroyed. The media promote the lie as the unquestionable truth and censor those with an alternative view or evidence. A great percentage of the population believe what they are told as the lie becomes an everybody-knows-that and the believing-masses turn on those with a mind of their own. The technique has been used endlessly throughout human history. Wokers are the biggest promotors of the climate lie *and* 'Covid' fascism because their minds are owned by the Cult; their sense of self-righteous self-purity knows no bounds; and they exist in a bubble of reality in which facts are irrelevant and only get in the way of looking without seeing.

Running through all of this like veins in a blue cheese is control of information, which means control of perception, which means control of behaviour, which collectively means control of human society. The Cult owns the global media and Silicon Valley fascists for the simple reason that it *has* to. Without control of information it can't control perception and through that human society. Examine every facet of the Cult agenda and you will see that anything supporting its introduction is never censored while anything pushing back is always censored. I say again: Psychopaths that know why they are doing this must go before Nuremberg trials and those that follow their orders must trot along behind them into the same dock. 'I was just following orders' didn't work the first time and it must not work now. Nuremberg trials must be held all over the world before public juries for politicians, government officials, police, compliant doctors, scientists and virologists, and all Cult operatives such as Gates, Tedros, Fauci, Vallance, Whitty, Ferguson, Zuckerberg, Wojcicki, Brin, Page, Dorsey, the whole damn lot of

them – including, no *especially*, the psychopath psychologists. Without them and the brainless, gutless excuses for journalists that have repeated their lies, none of this could be happening. Nobody can be allowed to escape justice for the psychological and economic Armageddon they are all responsible for visiting upon the human race.

As for the compliant, unquestioning, swathes of humanity, and the self-obsessed, all-knowing ignorance of the Wokers … don't start me. God help their kids. God help their grandkids. God *help them*.

CHAPTER NINE

We must have it? So what is it?

Well I won't back down. No, I won't back down. You can stand me up at the Gates of Hell. But I won't back down
Tom Petty

I will now focus on the genetically-manipulating 'Covid vaccines' which do not meet this official definition of a vaccine by the US Centers for Disease Control (CDC): 'A product that stimulates a person's immune system to produce immunity to a specific disease, protecting the person from that disease.' On that basis 'Covid vaccines' are not a vaccine in that the makers don't even claim they stop infection or transmission.

They are instead part of a multi-levelled conspiracy to change the nature of the human body and what it means to be 'human' and to depopulate an enormous swathe of humanity. What I shall call Human 1.0 is on the cusp of becoming Human 2.0 and for very sinister reasons. Before I get to the 'Covid vaccine' in detail here's some background to vaccines in general. Government regulators do not test vaccines – the makers do – and the makers control which data is revealed and which isn't. Children in America are given 50 vaccine doses by age six and 69 by age 19 and the effect of the whole combined schedule has never been tested. Autoimmune diseases when the immune system attacks its own body have soared in the mass vaccine era and so has disease in general in children and the young. Why wouldn't this be the case when vaccines target the *immune system?* The US government gave Big Pharma drug

companies immunity from prosecution for vaccine death and injury in the 1986 National Childhood Vaccine Injury Act (NCVIA) and since then the government (taxpayer) has been funding compensation for the consequences of Big Pharma vaccines. The criminal and satanic drug giants can't lose and the vaccine schedule has increased dramatically since 1986 for this reason. There is no incentive to make vaccines safe and a big incentive to make money by introducing ever more. Even against a ridiculously high bar to prove vaccine liability, and with the government controlling the hearing in which it is being challenged for compensation, the vaccine court has so far paid out more than $4 billion. These are the vaccines we are told are safe and psychopaths like Zuckerberg censor posts saying otherwise. The immunity law was even justified by a ruling that vaccines by their nature were 'unavoidably unsafe'.

Check out the ingredients of vaccines and you will be shocked if you are new to this. *They put that in children's bodies?? What??* Try aluminium, a brain toxin connected to dementia, aborted foetal tissue and formaldehyde which is used to embalm corpses. World-renowned aluminium expert Christopher Exley had his research into the health effect of aluminium in vaccines shut down by Keele University in the UK when it began taking funding from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. Research when diseases 'eradicated' by vaccines began to decline and you will find the fall began long *before* the vaccine was introduced. Sometimes the fall even plateaued after the vaccine. Diseases like scarlet fever for which there was no vaccine declined in the same way because of environmental and other factors. A perfect case in point is the polio vaccine. Polio began when lead arsenate was first sprayed as an insecticide and residues remained in food products. Spraying started in 1892 and the first US polio epidemic came in Vermont in 1894. The simple answer was to stop spraying, but Rockefeller-created Big Pharma had a better idea. Polio was decreed to be caused by the *poliovirus* which 'spreads from person to person and can infect a person's spinal cord'. Lead arsenate was replaced by the lethal DDT which had the same effect of causing paralysis by damaging the brain and central nervous

system. Polio plummeted when DDT was reduced and then banned, but the vaccine is still given the credit for something it didn't do. Today by far the biggest cause of polio is the vaccines promoted by Bill Gates. Vaccine justice campaigner Robert Kennedy Jr, son of assassinated (by the Cult) US Attorney General Robert Kennedy, wrote:

> In 2017, the World Health Organization (WHO) reluctantly admitted that the global explosion in polio is predominantly vaccine strain. The most frightening epidemics in Congo, Afghanistan, and the Philippines, are all linked to vaccines. In fact, by 2018, 70% of global polio cases were vaccine strain.

Vaccines make fortunes for Cult-owned Gates and Big Pharma while undermining the health and immune systems of the population. We had a glimpse of the mentality behind the Big Pharma cartel with a report on WION (World is One News), an international English language TV station based in India, which exposed the extraordinary behaviour of US drug company Pfizer over its 'Covid vaccine'. The WION report told how Pfizer had made fantastic demands of Argentina, Brazil and other countries in return for its 'vaccine'. These included immunity from prosecution, even for Pfizer negligence, government insurance to protect Pfizer from law suits and handing over as collateral sovereign assets of the country to include Argentina's bank reserves, military bases and embassy buildings. Pfizer demanded the same of Brazil in the form of waiving sovereignty of its assets abroad; exempting Pfizer from Brazilian laws; and giving Pfizer immunity from all civil liability. This is a 'vaccine' developed with government funding. Big Pharma is evil incarnate as a creation of the Cult and all must be handed tickets to Nuremberg.

Phantom 'vaccine' for a phantom 'disease'

I'll expose the 'Covid vaccine' fraud and then go on to the wider background of why the Cult has set out to 'vaccinate' every man, woman and child on the planet for an alleged 'new disease' with a survival rate of 99.77 percent (or more) even by the grotesquely-

manipulated figures of the World Health Organization and Johns Hopkins University. The 'infection' to 'death' ratio is 0.23 to 0.15 percent according to Stanford epidemiologist Dr John Ioannidis and while estimates vary the danger remains tiny. I say that if the truth be told the fake infection to fake death ratio is zero. Never mind all the evidence I have presented here and in *The Answer* that there is no 'virus' let us just focus for a moment on that death-rate figure of say 0.23 percent. The figure includes all those worldwide who have tested positive with a test not testing for the 'virus' and then died within 28 days or even longer of any other cause – *any other cause*. Now subtract all those illusory 'Covid' deaths on the global data sheets from the 0.23 percent. What do you think you would be left with? *Zero*. A vaccination has never been successfully developed for a so-called coronavirus. They have all failed at the animal testing stage when they caused hypersensitivity to what they were claiming to protect against and made the impact of a disease far worse. Cult-owned vaccine corporations got around that problem this time by bypassing animal trials, going straight to humans and making the length of the 'trials' before the public rollout as short as they could get away with. Normally it takes five to ten years or more to develop vaccines that still cause demonstrable harm to many people and that's without including the long-term effects that are never officially connected to the vaccination. 'Covid' non-vaccines have been officially produced and approved in a matter of months from a standing start and part of the reason is that (a) they were developed before the 'Covid' hoax began and (b) they are based on computer programs and not natural sources. Official non-trials were so short that government agencies gave *emergency*, not full, approval. 'Trials' were not even completed and full approval cannot be secured until they are. Public 'Covid vaccination' is actually a *continuation of the trial*. Drug company 'trials' are not scheduled to end until 2023 by which time a lot of people are going to be dead. Data on which government agencies gave this emergency approval was supplied by the Big Pharma corporations themselves in the form of Pfizer/BioNTech, AstraZeneca, Moderna, Johnson & Johnson, and

others, and this is the case with all vaccines. By its very nature *emergency* approval means drug companies do not have to prove that the 'vaccine' is 'safe and effective'. How could they with trials way short of complete? Government regulators only have to *believe* that they *could* be safe and effective. It is criminal manipulation to get products in circulation with no testing worth the name. Agencies giving that approval are infested with Big Pharma-connected place-people and they act in the interests of Big Pharma (the Cult) and not the public about whom they do not give a damn.

More human lab rats

'Covid vaccines' produced in record time by Pfizer/BioNTech and Moderna employ a technique *never approved before for use on humans*. They are known as mRNA 'vaccines' and inject a synthetic version of 'viral' mRNA or 'messenger RNA'. The key is in the term 'messenger'. The body works, or doesn't, on the basis of information messaging. Communications are constantly passing between and within the genetic system and the brain. Change those messages and you change the state of the body and even its very nature and you can change psychology and behaviour by the way the brain processes information. I think you are going to see significant changes in personality and perception of many people who have had the 'Covid vaccine' synthetic potions. Insider Aldous Huxley predicted the following in 1961 and mRNA 'vaccines' can be included in the term 'pharmacological methods':

> There will be, in the next generation or so, a pharmacological method of making people love their servitude, and producing dictatorship without tears, so to speak, producing a kind of painless concentration camp for entire societies, so that people will in fact have their own liberties taken away from them, but rather enjoy it, because they will be distracted from any desire to rebel by propaganda or brainwashing, or brainwashing enhanced by pharmacological methods. And this seems to be the final revolution.

Apologists claim that mRNA synthetic 'vaccines' don't change the DNA genetic blueprint because RNA does not affect DNA only the other way round. This is so disingenuous. A process called 'reverse

transcription' can convert RNA into DNA and be integrated into DNA in the cell nucleus. This was highlighted in December, 2020, by scientists at Harvard and Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). Geneticists report that more than 40 percent of mammalian genomes results from reverse transcription. On the most basic level if messaging changes then that sequence must lead to changes in DNA which is receiving and transmitting those communications. How can introducing synthetic material into cells not change the cells where DNA is located? The process is known as transfection which is defined as 'a technique to insert foreign nucleic acid (DNA or RNA) into a cell, typically with the intention of altering the properties of the cell'. Researchers at the Sloan Kettering Institute in New York found that changes in messenger RNA can deactivate tumour-suppressing proteins and thereby promote cancer. This is what happens when you mess with messaging. 'Covid vaccine' maker Moderna was founded in 2010 by Canadian stem cell biologist Derrick J. Rossi after his breakthrough discovery in the field of transforming and reprogramming stem cells. These are neutral cells that can be programmed to become any cell including sperm cells. Moderna was therefore founded on the principle of genetic manipulation and has never produced any vaccine or drug before its genetically-manipulating synthetic 'Covid' shite. Look at the name – Mode-RNA or Modify-RNA. Another important point is that the US Supreme Court has ruled that genetically-modified DNA, or complementary DNA (cDNA) synthesized in the laboratory from messenger RNA, can be patented and owned. These psychopaths are doing this to the human body.

Cells replicate synthetic mRNA in the 'Covid vaccines' and in theory the body is tricked into making antigens which trigger antibodies to target the 'virus spike proteins' which as Dr Tom Cowan said have *never been seen*. Cut the crap and these 'vaccines' deliver *self-replicating* synthetic material to the cells with the effect of changing human DNA. The more of them you have the more that process is compounded while synthetic material is all the time self-replicating. 'Vaccine'-maker Moderna describes mRNA as 'like

software for the cell' and so they are messing with the body's software. What happens when you change the software in a computer? Everything changes. For this reason the Cult is preparing a production line of mRNA 'Covid vaccines' and a long list of excuses to use them as with all the 'variants' of a 'virus' never shown to exist. The plan is further to transfer the mRNA technique to other vaccines mostly given to children and young people. The cumulative consequences will be a transformation of human DNA through a constant infusion of synthetic genetic material which will kill many and change the rest. Now consider that governments that have given emergency approval for a vaccine that's not a vaccine; never been approved for humans before; had no testing worth the name; and the makers have been given immunity from prosecution for any deaths or adverse effects suffered by the public. The UK government awarded *permanent legal indemnity* to itself and its employees for harm done when a patient is being treated for 'Covid-19' or 'suspected Covid-19'. That is quite a thought when these are possible 'side-effects' from the 'vaccine' (they are not 'side', they are effects) listed by the US Food and Drug Administration:

Guillain-Barre syndrome; acute disseminated encephalomyelitis; transverse myelitis; encephalitis; myelitis; encephalomyelitis; meningoencephalitis; meningitis; encephalopathy; convulsions; seizures; stroke; narcolepsy; cataplexy; anaphylaxis; acute myocardial infarction (heart attack); myocarditis; pericarditis; autoimmune disease; death; implications for pregnancy, and birth outcomes; other acute demyelinating diseases; non anaphylactic allergy reactions; thrombocytopenia ; disseminated intravascular coagulation; venous thromboembolism; arthritis; arthralgia; joint pain; Kawasaki disease; multisystem inflammatory syndrome in children; vaccine enhanced disease. The latter is the way the 'vaccine' has the potential to make diseases far worse than they would otherwise be.

UK doctor and freedom campaigner Vernon Coleman described the conditions in this list as 'all unpleasant, most of them very serious, and you can't get more serious than death'. The thought that anyone at all has had the 'vaccine' in these circumstances is testament to the potential that humanity has for clueless, unquestioning, stupidity and for many that programmed stupidity has already been terminal.

An insider speaks

Dr Michael Yeadon is a former Vice President, head of research and Chief Scientific Adviser at vaccine giant Pfizer. Yeadon worked on the inside of Big Pharma, but that did not stop him becoming a vocal critic of 'Covid vaccines' and their potential for multiple harms, including infertility in women. By the spring of 2021 he went much further and even used the no, no, term 'conspiracy'. When you begin to see what is going on it is impossible not to do so. Yeadon spoke out in an interview with freedom campaigner James Delingpole and I mentioned earlier how he said that no one had samples of 'the virus'. He explained that the mRNA technique originated in the anti-cancer field and ways to turn on and off certain genes which could be advantageous if you wanted to stop cancer growing out of control. 'That's the origin of them. They are a very unusual application, really.' Yeadon said that treating a cancer patient with an aggressive procedure might be understandable if the alternative was dying, but it was quite another thing to use the same technique as a public health measure. Most people involved wouldn't catch the infectious agent you were vaccinating against and if they did they probably wouldn't die:

> If you are really using it as a public health measure you really want to as close as you can get to zero sides-effects … I find it odd that they chose techniques that were really cutting their teeth in the field of oncology and I'm worried that in using gene-based vaccines that have to be injected in the body and spread around the body, get taken up into some cells, and the regulators haven't quite told us which cells they get taken up into … you are going to be generating a wide range of responses … with multiple steps each of which could go well or badly.

I doubt the Cult intends it to go well. Yeadon said that you can put any gene you like into the body through the 'vaccine'. 'You can certainly give them a gene that would do them some harm if you wanted.' I was intrigued when he said that when used in the cancer field the technique could turn genes on and off. I explore this process in *The Answer* and with different genes having different functions you could create mayhem – physically and psychologically – if you turned the wrong ones on and the right ones off. I read reports of an experiment by researchers at the University of Washington's school of computer science and engineering in which they encoded DNA to infect computers. The body is itself a biological computer and if human DNA can inflict damage on a computer why can't the computer via synthetic material mess with the human body? It can. The Washington research team said it was possible to insert malicious malware into 'physical DNA strands' and corrupt the computer system of a gene sequencing machine as it 'reads gene letters and stores them as binary digits 0 and 1'. They concluded that hackers could one day use blood or spit samples to access computer systems and obtain sensitive data from police forensics labs or infect genome files. It is at this level of digital interaction that synthetic 'vaccines' need to be seen to get the full picture and that will become very clear later on. Michael Yeadon said it made no sense to give the 'vaccine' to younger people who were in no danger from the 'virus'. What was the benefit? It was all downside with potential effects:

> The fact that my government in what I thought was a civilised, rational country, is raining [the 'vaccine'] on people in their 30s and 40s, even my children in their 20s, they're getting letters and phone calls, I know this is not right and any of you doctors who are vaccinating you know it's not right, too. They are not at risk. They are not at risk from the disease, so you are now hoping that the side-effects are so rare that you get away with it. You don't give new technology … that you don't understand to 100 percent of the population.

Blood clot problems with the AstraZeneca 'vaccine' have been affecting younger people to emphasise the downside risks with no benefit. AstraZeneca's version, produced with Oxford University, does not use mRNA, but still gets its toxic cocktail inside cells where

it targets DNA. The Johnson & Johnson 'vaccine' which uses a similar technique has also produced blood clot effects to such an extent that the United States paused its use at one point. They are all 'gene therapy' (cell modification) procedures and not 'vaccines'. The truth is that once the content of these injections enter cells we have no idea what the effect will be. People can speculate and some can give very educated opinions and that's good. In the end, though, only the makers know what their potions are designed to do and even they won't know every last consequence. Michael Yeadon was scathing about doctors doing what they knew to be wrong. 'Everyone's mute', he said. Doctors in the NHS must know this was not right, coming into work and injecting people. 'I don't know how they sleep at night. I know I couldn't do it. I know that if I were in that position I'd have to quit.' He said he knew enough about toxicology to know this was not a good risk-benefit. Yeadon had spoken to seven or eight university professors and all except two would not speak out publicly. Their universities had a policy that no one said anything that countered the government and its medical advisors. They were afraid of losing their government grants. This is how intimidation has been used to silence the truth at every level of the system. I say silence, but these people could still speak out if they made that choice. Yeadon called them 'moral cowards' – 'This is about your children and grandchildren's lives and you have just buggered off and left it.'

'Variant' nonsense

Some of his most powerful comments related to the alleged 'variants' being used to instil more fear, justify more lockdowns, and introduce more 'vaccines'. He said government claims about 'variants' were nonsense. He had checked the alleged variant 'codes' and they were 99.7 percent identical to the 'original'. This was the human identity difference equivalent to putting a baseball cap on and off or wearing it the other way round. A 0.3 percent difference would make it impossible for that 'variant' to escape immunity from the 'original'. This made no sense of having new 'vaccines' for

'variants'. He said there would have to be at least a *30 percent* difference for that to be justified and even then he believed the immune system would still recognise what it was. Gates-funded 'variant modeller' and 'vaccine'-pusher John Edmunds might care to comment. Yeadon said drug companies were making new versions of the 'vaccine' as a 'top up' for 'variants'. Worse than that, he said, the 'regulators' around the world like the MHRA in the UK had got together and agreed that because 'vaccines' for 'variants' were so similar to the first 'vaccines' *they did not have to do safety studies*. How transparently sinister that is. This is when Yeadon said: 'There is a conspiracy here.' There was no need for another vaccine for 'variants' and yet we were told that there was and the country had shut its borders because of them. 'They are going into hundreds of millions of arms without passing 'go' or any regulator. Why did they do that? Why did they pick this method of making the vaccine?'

The reason had to be something bigger than that it seemed and 'it's not protection against the virus'. It's was a far bigger project that meant politicians and advisers were willing to do things and not do things that knowingly resulted in avoidable deaths – 'that's already happened when you think about lockdown and deprivation of health care for a year.' He spoke of people prepared to do something that results in the avoidable death of their fellow human beings and it not bother them. This is the penny-drop I have been working to get across for more than 30 years – the level of pure evil we are dealing with. Yeadon said his friends and associates could not believe there could be that much evil, but he reminded them of Stalin, Pol Pot and Hitler and of what Stalin had said: 'One death is a tragedy. A million? A statistic.' He could not think of a benign explanation for why you need top-up vaccines 'which I'm sure you don't' and for the regulators 'to just get out of the way and wave them through'. Why would the regulators do that when they were still wrestling with the dangers of the 'parent' vaccine? He was clearly shocked by what he had seen since the 'Covid' hoax began and now he was thinking the previously unthinkable:

If you wanted to depopulate a significant proportion of the world and to do it in a way that doesn't involve destruction of the environment with nuclear weapons, poisoning everyone with anthrax or something like that, and you wanted plausible deniability while you had a multi-year infectious disease crisis, I actually don't think you could come up with a better plan of work than seems to be in front of me. I can't say that's what they are going to do, but I can't think of a benign explanation why they are doing it.

He said he never thought that they would get rid of 99 percent of humans, but now he wondered. 'If you wanted to that this would be a hell of a way to do it – it would be unstoppable folks.' Yeadon had concluded that those who submitted to the 'vaccine' would be allowed to have some kind of normal life (but for how long?) while screws were tightened to coerce and mandate the last few percent. 'I think they'll put the rest of them in a prison camp. I wish I was wrong, but I don't think I am.' Other points he made included: There were no coronavirus vaccines then suddenly they all come along at the same time; we have no idea of the long term affect with trials so short; coercing or forcing people to have medical procedures is against the Nuremberg Code instigated when the Nazis did just that; people should at least delay having the 'vaccine'; a quick Internet search confirms that masks don't reduce respiratory viral transmission and 'the government knows that'; they have smashed civil society and they know that, too; two dozen peer-reviewed studies show no connection between lockdown and reducing deaths; he knew from personal friends the elite were still flying around and going on holiday while the public were locked down; the elite were not having the 'vaccines'. He was also asked if 'vaccines' could be made to target difference races. He said he didn't know, but the document by the Project for the New American Century in September, 2000, said developing 'advanced forms of biological warfare that can target *specific genotypes* may transform biological warfare from the realm of terror to a politically useful tool.' Oh, they're evil all right. Of that we can be *absolutely* sure.

Another cull of old people

We have seen from the CDC definition that the mRNA 'Covid vaccine' is not a vaccine and nor are the others that *claim* to reduce 'severity of symptoms' in *some* people, but not protect from infection or transmission. What about all the lies about returning to 'normal' if people were 'vaccinated'? If they are not claimed to stop infection and transmission of the alleged 'virus', how does anything change? This was all lies to manipulate people to take the jabs and we are seeing that now with masks and distancing still required for the 'vaccinated'. How did they think that elderly people with fragile health and immune responses were going to be affected by infusing their cells with synthetic material and other toxic substances? They *knew* that in the short and long term it would be devastating and fatal as the culling of the old that began with the first lockdowns was continued with the 'vaccine'. Death rates in care homes soared immediately residents began to be 'vaccinated' – infused with synthetic material. Brave and committed whistleblower nurses put their careers at risk by exposing this truth while the rest kept their heads down and their mouths shut to put their careers before those they are supposed to care for. A long-time American Certified Nursing Assistant who gave his name as James posted a video in which he described emotionally what happened in his care home when vaccination began. He said that during 2020 very few residents were sick with 'Covid' and no one died during the entire year; but shortly after the Pfizer mRNA injections 14 people died within two weeks and many others were near death. 'They're dropping like flies', he said. Residents who walked on their own before the shot could no longer and they had lost their ability to conduct an intelligent conversation. The home's management said the sudden deaths were caused by a 'super-spreader' of 'Covid-19'. Then how come, James asked, that residents who refused to take the injections were not sick? It was a case of inject the elderly with mRNA synthetic potions and blame their illness and death that followed on the 'virus'. James described what was happening in care homes as 'the greatest crime of genocide this country has ever seen'. Remember the NHS staff nurse from earlier who used the same

word ‘genocide’ for what was happening with the ‘vaccines’ and that it was an ‘act of human annihilation’. A UK care home whistleblower told a similar story to James about the effect of the ‘vaccine’ in deaths and ‘outbreaks’ of illness dubbed ‘Covid’ after getting the jab. She told how her care home management and staff had zealously imposed government regulations and no one was allowed to even question the official narrative let alone speak out against it. She said the NHS was even worse. Again we see the results of reframing. A worker at a local care home where I live said they had not had a single case of ‘Covid’ there for almost a year and when the residents were ‘vaccinated’ they had 19 positive cases in two weeks with eight dying.

It’s not the ‘vaccine’ – honest

The obvious cause and effect was being ignored by the media and most of the public. Australia’s health minister Greg Hunt (a former head of strategy at the World Economic Forum) was admitted to hospital after he had the ‘vaccine’. He was suffering according to reports from the skin infection ‘cellulitis’ and it must have been a severe case to have warranted days in hospital. Immediately the authorities said this was nothing to do with the ‘vaccine’ when an effect of some vaccines is a ‘cellulitis-like reaction’. We had families of perfectly healthy old people who died after the ‘vaccine’ saying that if only they had been given the ‘vaccine’ earlier they would still be alive. As a numbskull rating that is off the chart. A father of four ‘died of Covid’ at aged 48 when he was taken ill two days after having the ‘vaccine’. The man, a health administrator, had been ‘shielding during the pandemic’ and had ‘not really left the house’ until he went for the ‘vaccine’. Having the ‘vaccine’ and then falling ill and dying does not seem to have qualified as a possible cause and effect and ‘Covid-19’ went on his death certificate. His family said they had no idea how he ‘caught the virus’. A family member said: ‘Tragically, it could be that going for a vaccination ultimately led to him catching Covid …The sad truth is that they are never going to know where it came from.’ The family warned people to remember

that the virus still existed and was 'very real'. So was their stupidity. Nurses and doctors who had the first round of the 'vaccine' were collapsing, dying and ending up in a hospital bed while they or their grieving relatives were saying they'd still have the 'vaccine' again despite what happened. I kid you not. You mean if your husband returned from the dead he'd have the same 'vaccine' again that killed him??

Doctors at the VCU Medical Center in Richmond, Virginia, said the Johnson & Johnson 'vaccine' was to blame for a man's skin peeling off. Patient Richard Terrell said: 'It all just happened so fast. My skin peeled off. It's still coming off on my hands now.' He said it was stinging, burning and itching and when he bent his arms and legs it was very painful with 'the skin swollen and rubbing against itself'. Pfizer/BioNTech and Moderna vaccines use mRNA to change the cell while the Johnson & Johnson version uses DNA in a process similar to AstraZeneca's technique. Johnson & Johnson and AstraZeneca have both had their 'vaccines' paused by many countries after causing serious blood problems. Terrell's doctor Fnu Nutan said he could have died if he hadn't got medical attention. It sounds terrible so what did Nutan and Terrell say about the 'vaccine' now? Oh, they still recommend that people have it. A nurse in a hospital bed 40 minutes after the vaccination and unable to swallow due to throat swelling was told by a doctor that he lost mobility in his arm for 36 hours following the vaccination. What did he say to the ailing nurse? 'Good for you for getting the vaccination.' We are dealing with a serious form of cognitive dissonance madness in both public and medical staff. There is a remarkable correlation between those having the 'vaccine' and trumpeting the fact and suffering bad happenings shortly afterwards. Witold Rogiewicz, a Polish doctor, made a video of his 'vaccination' and ridiculed those who were questioning its safety and the intentions of Bill Gates: 'Vaccinate yourself to protect yourself, your loved ones, friends and also patients. And to mention quickly I have info for anti-vaxxers and anti-Coviders if you want to contact Bill Gates you can do this through me.' He further ridiculed the dangers of 5G. Days later he

was dead, but naturally the vaccination wasn't mentioned in the verdict of 'heart attack'.

Lies, lies and more lies

So many members of the human race have slipped into extreme states of insanity and unfortunately they include reframed doctors and nursing staff. Having a 'vaccine' and dying within minutes or hours is not considered a valid connection while death from any cause within 28 days or longer of a positive test with a test not testing for the 'virus' means 'Covid-19' goes on the death certificate. How could that 'vaccine'-death connection not have been made except by calculated deceit? US figures in the initial rollout period to February 12th, 2020, revealed that a third of the deaths reported to the CDC after 'Covid vaccines' happened within 48 hours. Five men in the UK suffered an 'extremely rare' blood clot problem after having the AstraZeneca 'vaccine', but no causal link was established said the Gates-funded Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA) which had given the 'vaccine' emergency approval to be used. Former Pfizer executive Dr Michael Yeadon explained in his interview how the procedures could cause blood coagulation and clots. People who should have been at no risk were dying from blood clots in the brain and he said he had heard from medical doctor friends that people were suffering from skin bleeding and massive headaches. The AstraZeneca 'shot' was stopped by some 20 countries over the blood clotting issue and still the corrupt MHRA, the European Medicines Agency (EMA) and the World Health Organization said that it should continue to be given even though the EMA admitted that it 'still cannot rule out definitively' a link between blood clotting and the 'vaccine'. Later Marco Cavaleri, head of EMA vaccine strategy, said there was indeed a clear link between the 'vaccine' and thrombosis, but they didn't know why. So much for the trials showing the 'vaccine' is safe. Blood clots were affecting younger people who would be under virtually no danger from 'Covid' even if it existed which makes it all the more stupid and sinister.

The British government responded to public alarm by wheeling out June Raine, the terrifyingly weak infant school headmistress sound-alike who heads the UK MHRA drug 'regulator'. The idea that she would stand up to Big Pharma and government pressure is laughable and she told us that all was well in the same way that she did when allowing untested, never-used-on-humans-before, genetically-manipulating 'vaccines' to be exposed to the public in the first place. Mass lying is the new normal of the 'Covid' era. The MHRA later said 30 cases of rare blood clots had by then been connected with the AstraZeneca 'vaccine' (that means a lot more in reality) while stressing that the benefits of the jab in preventing 'Covid-19' outweighed any risks. A more ridiculous and disingenuous statement with callous disregard for human health it is hard to contemplate. Immediately after the mendacious 'all-clears' two hospital workers in Denmark experienced blood clots and cerebral haemorrhaging following the AstraZeneca jab and one died. Top Norwegian health official Pål Andre Holme said the 'vaccine' was the only common factor: 'There is nothing in the patient history of these individuals that can give such a powerful immune response … I am confident that the antibodies that we have found are the cause, and I see no other explanation than it being the vaccine which triggers it.' Strokes, a clot or bleed in the brain, were clearly associated with the 'vaccine' from word of mouth and whistleblower reports. Similar consequences followed with all these 'vaccines' that we were told were so safe and as the numbers grew by the day it was clear we were witnessing human carnage.

Learning the hard way

A woman interviewed by UKColumn told how her husband suffered dramatic health effects after the vaccine when he'd been in good health all his life. He went from being a little unwell to losing all feeling in his legs and experiencing 'excruciating pain'. Misdiagnosis followed twice at Accident and Emergency (an 'allergy' and 'sciatica') before he was admitted to a neurology ward where doctors said his serious condition had been caused by the

'vaccine'. Another seven 'vaccinated' people were apparently being treated on the same ward for similar symptoms. The woman said he had the 'vaccine' because they believed media claims that it was safe. 'I didn't think the government would give out a vaccine that does this to somebody; I believed they would be bringing out a vaccination that would be safe.' What a tragic way to learn that lesson. Another woman posted that her husband was transporting stroke patients to hospital on almost every shift and when he asked them if they had been 'vaccinated' for 'Covid' they all replied 'yes'. One had a 'massive brain bleed' the day after his second dose. She said her husband reported the 'just been vaccinated' information every time to doctors in A and E only for them to ignore it, make no notes and appear annoyed that it was even mentioned. This particular report cannot be verified, but it expresses a common theme that confirms the monumental underreporting of 'vaccine' consequences. Interestingly as the 'vaccines' and their brain blood clot/stroke consequences began to emerge the UK National Health Service began a publicity campaign telling the public what to do in the event of a stroke. A Scottish NHS staff nurse who quit in disgust in March, 2021, said:

I have seen traumatic injuries from the vaccine, they're not getting reported to the yellow card [adverse reaction] scheme, they're treating the symptoms, not asking why, why it's happening. It's just treating the symptoms and when you speak about it you're dismissed like you're crazy, I'm not crazy, I'm not crazy because every other colleague I've spoken to is terrified to speak out, they've had enough.

Videos appeared on the Internet of people uncontrollably shaking after the 'vaccine' with no control over muscles, limbs and even their face. A Scottish mother broke out in a severe rash all over her body almost immediately after she was given the AstraZeneca 'vaccine'. The pictures were horrific. Leigh King, a 41-year-old hairdresser from Lanarkshire said: 'Never in my life was I prepared for what I was about to experience … My skin was so sore and constantly hot … I have never felt pain like this …' But don't you worry, the 'vaccine' is perfectly safe. Then there has been the effect on medical

staff who have been pressured to have the 'vaccine' by psychopathic 'health' authorities and government. A London hospital consultant who gave the name K. Polyakova wrote this to the *British Medical Journal* or *BMJ*:

> I am currently struggling with … the failure to report the reality of the morbidity caused by our current vaccination program within the health service and staff population. The levels of sickness after vaccination is unprecedented and staff are getting very sick and some with neurological symptoms which is having a huge impact on the health service function. Even the young and healthy are off for days, some for weeks, and some requiring medical treatment. Whole teams are being taken out as they went to get vaccinated together.
>
> Mandatory vaccination in this instance is stupid, unethical and irresponsible when it comes to protecting our staff and public health. We are in the voluntary phase of vaccination, and encouraging staff to take an unlicensed product that is impacting on their immediate health … it is clearly stated that these vaccine products do not offer immunity or stop transmission. In which case why are we doing it?

Not to protect health that's for sure. Medical workers are lauded by governments for agenda reasons when they couldn't give a toss about them any more than they can for the population in general. Schools across America faced the same situation as they closed due to the high number of teachers and other staff with bad reactions to the Pfizer/BioNTech, Moderna, and Johnson & Johnson 'Covid vaccines' all of which were linked to death and serious adverse effects. The *BMJ* took down the consultant's comments pretty quickly on the grounds that they were being used to spread 'disinformation'. They were exposing the truth about the 'vaccine' was the real reason. The cover-up is breathtaking.

Hiding the evidence

The scale of the 'vaccine' death cover-up worldwide can be confirmed by comparing official figures with the personal experience of the public. I heard of many people in my community who died immediately or soon after the vaccine that would never appear in the media or even likely on the official totals of 'vaccine' fatalities and adverse reactions when only about ten percent are estimated to be

reported and I have seen some estimates as low as one percent in a Harvard study. In the UK alone by April 29th, 2021, some 757,654 adverse reactions had been officially reported from the Pfizer/BioNTech, Oxford/AstraZeneca and Moderna 'vaccines' with more than a thousand deaths linked to jabs and that means an estimated ten times this number in reality from a ten percent reporting rate percentage. That's seven million adverse reactions and 10,000 potential deaths and a one percent reporting rate would be ten times *those* figures. In 1976 the US government pulled the swine flu vaccine after *53* deaths. The UK data included a combined 10,000 eye disorders from the 'Covid vaccines' with more than 750 suffering visual impairment or blindness and again multiply by the estimated reporting percentages. As 'Covid cases' officially fell hospitals virtually empty during the 'Covid crisis' began to fill up with a range of other problems in the wake of the 'vaccine' rollout. The numbers across America have also been catastrophic. Deaths linked to *all* types of vaccine increased by *6,000 percent* in the first quarter of 2021 compared with 2020. A 39-year-old woman from Ogden, Utah, died four days after receiving a second dose of Moderna's 'Covid vaccine' when her liver, heart and kidneys all failed despite the fact that she had no known medical issues or conditions. Her family sought an autopsy, but Dr Erik Christensen, Utah's chief medical examiner, said proving vaccine injury as a cause of death almost never happened. He could think of only one instance where an autopsy would name a vaccine as the official cause of death and that would be anaphylaxis where someone received a vaccine and died almost instantaneously. 'Short of that, it would be difficult for us to definitively say this is the vaccine,' Christensen said. If that is true this must be added to the estimated ten percent (or far less) reporting rate of vaccine deaths and serious reactions and the conclusion can only be that vaccine deaths and serious reactions – including these 'Covid' potions' – are phenomenally understated in official figures. The same story can be found everywhere. Endless accounts of deaths and serious reactions among the public, medical

and care home staff while official figures did not even begin to reflect this.

Professional script-reader Dr David Williams, a 'top public-health official' in Ontario, Canada, insulted our intelligence by claiming only four serious adverse reactions and no deaths from the more than 380,000 vaccine doses then given. This bore no resemblance to what people knew had happened in their owns circles and we had Dirk Huyer in charge of getting millions vaccinated in Ontario while at the same time he was Chief Coroner for the province investigating causes of death including possible death from the vaccine. An aide said he had stepped back from investigating deaths, but evidence indicated otherwise. Rosemary Frei, who secured a Master of Science degree in molecular biology at the Faculty of Medicine at Canada's University of Calgary before turning to investigative journalism, was one who could see that official figures for 'vaccine' deaths and reactions made no sense. She said that doctors seldom reported adverse events and when people got really sick or died after getting a vaccination they would attribute that to anything except the vaccines. It had been that way for years and anyone who wondered aloud whether the 'Covid vaccines' or other shots cause harm is immediately branded as 'anti-vax' and 'anti-science'. This was 'career-threatening' for health professionals. Then there was the huge pressure to support the push to 'vaccinate' billions in the quickest time possible. Frei said:

> So that's where we're at today. More than half a million vaccine doses have been given to people in Ontario alone. The rush is on to vaccinate all 15 million of us in the province by September. And the mainstream media are screaming for this to be sped up even more. That all adds up to only a very slim likelihood that we're going to be told the truth by officials about how many people are getting sick or dying from the vaccines.

What is true of Ontario is true of everywhere.

They KNEW – and still did it

The authorities knew what was going to happen with multiple deaths and adverse reactions. The UK government's Gates-funded

and Big Pharma-dominated Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA) hired a company to employ AI in compiling the projected reactions to the 'vaccine' that would otherwise be uncountable. The request for applications said: 'The MHRA urgently seeks an Artificial Intelligence (AI) software tool to process the expected high volume of Covid-19 vaccine Adverse Drug Reaction …' This was from the agency, headed by the disingenuous June Raine, that gave the 'vaccines' emergency approval and the company was hired before the first shot was given. 'We are going to kill and maim you – is that okay?' 'Oh, yes, perfectly fine – I'm very grateful, thank you, doctor.' The range of 'Covid vaccine' adverse reactions goes on for page after page in the MHRA criminally underreported 'Yellow Card' system and includes affects to eyes, ears, skin, digestion, blood and so on. Raine's MHRA amazingly claimed that the 'overall safety experience … is so far as expected from the clinical trials'. The death, serious adverse effects, deafness and blindness were *expected?* When did they ever mention that? If these human tragedies were expected then those that gave approval for the use of these 'vaccines' must be guilty of crimes against humanity including murder – a definition of which is 'killing a person with malice aforethought or with recklessness manifesting extreme indifference to the value of human life.' People involved at the MHRA, the CDC in America and their equivalent around the world must go before Nuremberg trials to answer for their callous inhumanity. We are only talking here about the immediate effects of the 'vaccine'. The longer-term impact of the DNA synthetic manipulation is the main reason they are so hysterically desperate to inoculate the entire global population in the shortest possible time.

Africa and the developing world are a major focus for the 'vaccine' depopulation agenda and a mass vaccination sales-pitch is underway thanks to caring people like the Rockefellers and other Cult assets. The Rockefeller Foundation, which pre-empted the 'Covid pandemic' in a document published in 2010 that 'predicted' what happened a decade later, announced an initial $34.95 million grant in February, 2021, 'to ensure more equitable access to Covid-19

testing and vaccines' among other things in Africa in collaboration with '24 organizations, businesses, and government agencies'. The pan-Africa initiative would focus on 10 countries: Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, Rwanda, South Africa, Tanzania, Uganda, and Zambia'. Rajiv Shah, President of the Rockefeller Foundation and former administrator of CIA-controlled USAID, said that if Africa was not mass-vaccinated (to change the DNA of its people) it was a 'threat to all of humanity' and not fair on Africans. When someone from the Rockefeller Foundation says they want to do something to help poor and deprived people and countries it is time for a belly-laugh. They are doing this out of the goodness of their 'heart' because 'vaccinating' the entire global population is what the 'Covid' hoax set out to achieve. Official 'decolonisation' of Africa by the Cult was merely a prelude to financial colonisation on the road to a return to physical colonisation. The 'vaccine' is vital to that and the sudden and convenient death of the 'Covid' sceptic president of Tanzania can be seen in its true light. A lot of people in Africa are aware that this is another form of colonisation and exploitation and they need to stand their ground.

The 'vaccine is working' scam

A potential problem for the Cult was that the 'vaccine' is meant to change human DNA and body messaging and not to protect anyone from a 'virus' never shown to exist. The vaccine couldn't work because it was not designed to work and how could they make it *appear* to be working so that more people would have it? This was overcome by lowering the amplification rate of the PCR test to produce fewer 'cases' and therefore fewer 'deaths'. Some of us had been pointing out since March, 2020, that the amplification rate of the test not testing for the 'virus' had been made artificially high to generate positive tests which they could call 'cases' to justify lockdowns. The World Health Organization recommended an absurdly high 45 amplification cycles to ensure the high positives required by the Cult and then remained silent on the issue until January 20th, 2021 – Biden's Inauguration Day. This was when the

'vaccinations' were seriously underway and on that day the WHO recommended after discussions with America's CDC that laboratories *lowered their testing amplification*. Dr David Samadi, a certified urologist and health writer, said the WHO was encouraging all labs to reduce their cycle count for PCR tests. He said the current cycle was much too high and was 'resulting in any particle being declared a positive case'. Even one mainstream news report I saw said this meant the number of 'Covid' infections may have been 'dramatically inflated'. Oh, just a little bit. The CDC in America issued new guidance to laboratories in April, 2021, to use 28 cycles *but only for 'vaccinated' people*. The timing of the CDC/WHO interventions were cynically designed to make it appear the 'vaccines' were responsible for falling cases and deaths when the real reason can be seen in the following examples. New York's state lab, the Wadsworth Center, identified 872 positive tests in July, 2020, based on a threshold of 40 cycles. When the figure was lowered to 35 cycles *43 percent* of the 872 were no longer 'positives'. At 30 cycles the figure was 63 percent. A Massachusetts lab found that between *85 to 90 percent* of people who tested positive in July with a cycle threshold of 40 would be negative at 30 cycles, Ashish Jha, MD, director of the Harvard Global Health Institute, said: 'I'm really shocked that it could be that high … Boy, does it really change the way we need to be thinking about testing.' I'm shocked that I could see the obvious in the spring of 2020, with no medical background, and most medical professionals still haven't worked it out. No, that's not shocking – it's terrifying.

Three weeks after the WHO directive to lower PCR cycles the London *Daily Mail* ran this headline: 'Why ARE Covid cases plummeting? New infections have fallen 45% in the US and 30% globally in the past 3 weeks but experts say vaccine is NOT the main driver because only 8% of Americans and 13% of people worldwide have received their first dose.' They acknowledged that the drop could not be attributed to the 'vaccine', but soon this morphed throughout the media into the 'vaccine' has caused cases and deaths to fall when it was the PCR threshold. In December, 2020, there was

chaos at English Channel ports with truck drivers needing negative 'Covid' tests before they could board a ferry home for Christmas. The government wanted to remove the backlog as fast as possible and they brought in troops to do the 'testing'. Out of 1,600 drivers just *36* tested positive and the rest were given the all clear to cross the Channel. I guess the authorities thought that 36 was the least they could get away with without the unquestioning catching on. The amplification trick which most people believed in the absence of information in the mainstream applied more pressure on those refusing the 'vaccine' to succumb when it 'obviously worked'. The truth was the exact opposite with deaths in care homes soaring with the 'vaccine' and in Israel the term used was 'skyrocket'. A re-analysis of published data from the Israeli Health Ministry led by Dr Hervé Seligmann at the Medicine Emerging Infectious and Tropical Diseases at Aix-Marseille University found that Pfizer's 'Covid vaccine' killed 'about 40 times more [elderly] people than the disease itself would have killed' during a five-week vaccination period and *260 times* more younger people than would have died from the 'virus' even according to the manipulated 'virus' figures. Dr Seligmann and his co-study author, Haim Yativ, declared after reviewing the Israeli 'vaccine' death data: 'This is a new Holocaust.'

Then, in mid-April, 2021, after vast numbers of people worldwide had been 'vaccinated', the story changed with clear coordination. The UK government began to prepare the ground for more future lockdowns when Nuremberg-destined Boris Johnson told yet another whopper. He said that cases had fallen because of *lockdowns* not 'vaccines'. Lockdowns are irrelevant when *there is no 'virus'* and the test and fraudulent death certificates are deciding the number of 'cases' and 'deaths'. Study after study has shown that lockdowns don't work and instead kill and psychologically destroy people. Meanwhile in the United States Anthony Fauci and Rochelle Walensky, the ultra-Zionist head of the CDC, peddled the same line. More lockdown was the answer and not the 'vaccine', a line repeated on cue by the moron that is Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau. Why all the hysteria to get everyone 'vaccinated' if lockdowns and

not 'vaccines' made the difference? None of it makes sense on the face of it. Oh, but it does. The Cult wants lockdowns *and* the 'vaccine' and if the 'vaccine' is allowed to be seen as the total answer lockdowns would no longer be justified when there are still livelihoods to destroy. 'Variants' and renewed upward manipulation of PCR amplification are planned to instigate never-ending lockdown *and* more 'vaccines'.

You *must* have it – we're desperate

Israel, where the Jewish and Arab population are ruled by the Sabbatian Cult, was the front-runner in imposing the DNA-manipulating 'vaccine' on its people to such an extent that Jewish refusers began to liken what was happening to the early years of Nazi Germany. This would seem to be a fantastic claim. Why would a government of Jewish people be acting like the Nazis did? If you realise that the Sabbatian Cult was behind the Nazis and that Sabbatians hate Jews the pieces start to fit and the question of why a 'Jewish' government would treat Jews with such callous disregard for their lives and freedom finds an answer. Those controlling the government of Israel *aren't Jewish* – they're Sabbatian. Israeli lawyer Tamir Turgal was one who made the Nazi comparison in comments to German lawyer Reiner Fuellmich who is leading a class action lawsuit against the psychopaths for crimes against humanity. Turgal described how the Israeli government was vaccinating children and pregnant women on the basis that there was no evidence that this was dangerous when they had no evidence that it *wasn't* dangerous either. They just had no evidence. This was medical experimentation and Turgal said this breached the Nuremberg Code about medical experimentation and procedures requiring informed consent and choice. Think about that. A Nuremberg Code developed because of Nazi experimentation on Jews and others in concentration camps by people like the evil-beyond-belief Josef Mengele is being breached by the *Israeli* government; but when you know that it's a *Sabbatian* government along with its intelligence and military agencies like Mossad, Shin Bet and the Israeli Defense Forces, and that Sabbatians

were the force behind the Nazis, the kaleidoscope comes into focus. What have we come to when Israeli Jews are suing their government for violating the Nuremberg Code by essentially making Israelis subject to a medical experiment using the controversial 'vaccines'? It's a shocker that this has to be done in the light of what happened in Nazi Germany. The Anshe Ha-Emet, or 'People of the Truth', made up of Israeli doctors, lawyers, campaigners and public, have launched a lawsuit with the International Criminal Court. It says:

> When the heads of the Ministry of Health as well as the prime minister presented the vaccine in Israel and began the vaccination of Israeli residents, the vaccinated were not advised, that, in practice, they are taking part in a medical experiment and that their consent is required for this under the Nuremberg Code.

The irony is unbelievable, but easily explained in one word: Sabbatians. The foundation of Israeli 'Covid' apartheid is the 'green pass' or 'green passport' which allows Jews and Arabs who have had the DNA-manipulating 'vaccine' to go about their lives – to work, fly, travel in general, go to shopping malls, bars, restaurants, hotels, concerts, gyms, swimming pools, theatres and sports venues, while non-'vaccinated' are banned from all those places and activities. Israelis have likened the 'green pass' to the yellow stars that Jews in Nazi Germany were forced to wear – the same as the yellow stickers that a branch of UK supermarket chain Morrisons told exempt mask-wears they had to display when shopping. How very sensitive. The Israeli system is blatant South African-style apartheid on the basis of compliance or non-compliance to fascism rather than colour of the skin. How appropriate that the Sabbatian Israeli government was so close to the pre-Mandela apartheid regime in Pretoria. The Sabbatian-instigated 'vaccine passport' in Israel is planned for everywhere. Sabbatians struck a deal with Pfizer that allowed them to lead the way in the percentage of a national population infused with synthetic material and the result was catastrophic. Israeli freedom activist Shai Dannon told me how chairs were appearing on beaches that said 'vaccinated only'. Health Minister Yuli Edelstein said that anyone unwilling or unable to get

the jabs that 'confer immunity' will be 'left behind'. The man's a liar. Not even the makers claim the 'vaccines' confer immunity. When you see those figures of 'vaccine' deaths these psychopaths were saying that you must take the chance the 'vaccine' will kill you or maim you while knowing it will change your DNA or lockdown for you will be permanent. That's fascism. The Israeli parliament passed a law to allow personal information of the non-vaccinated to be shared with local and national authorities for three months. This was claimed by its supporters to be a way to 'encourage' people to be vaccinated. Hadas Ziv from Physicians for Human Rights described this as a 'draconian law which crushed medical ethics and the patient rights'. But that's the idea, the Sabbatians would reply.

Your papers, please

Sabbatian Israel was leading what has been planned all along to be a global 'vaccine pass' called a 'green passport' without which you would remain in permanent lockdown restriction and unable to do anything. This is how badly – *desperately* – the Cult is to get everyone 'vaccinated'. The term and colour 'green' was not by chance and related to the psychology of fusing the perception of the green climate hoax with the 'Covid' hoax and how the 'solution' to both is the same Great Reset. Lying politicians, health officials and psychologists denied there were any plans for mandatory vaccinations or restrictions based on vaccinations, but they knew that was exactly what was meant to happen with governments of all countries reaching agreements to enforce a global system. 'Free' Denmark and 'free' Sweden unveiled digital vaccine certification. Cyprus, Czech Republic, Estonia, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Italy, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia, and Spain have all committed to a vaccine passport system and the rest including the whole of the EU would follow. The satanic UK government will certainly go this way despite mendacious denials and at the time of writing it is trying to manipulate the public into having the 'vaccine' so they could go abroad on a summer holiday. How would that work without something to prove you had the synthetic toxicity injected into you?

Documents show that the EU's European Commission was moving towards 'vaccine certificates' in 2018 and 2019 before the 'Covid' hoax began. They knew what was coming. Abracadabra – Ursula von der Leyen, the German President of the Commission, announced in March, 2021, an EU 'Digital Green Certificate' – green again – to track the public's 'Covid status'. The passport sting is worldwide and the Far East followed the same pattern with South Korea ruling that only those with 'vaccination' passports – again the *green* pass – would be able to 'return to their daily lives'.

Bill Gates has been preparing for this 'passport' with other Cult operatives for years and beyond the paper version is a Gates-funded 'digital tattoo' to identify who has been vaccinated and who hasn't. The 'tattoo' is reported to include a substance which is externally readable to confirm who has been vaccinated. This is a bio-luminous light-generating enzyme (think fireflies) called … *Luciferase*. Yes, named after the Cult 'god' Lucifer the 'light bringer' of whom more to come. Gates said he funded the readable tattoo to ensure children in the developing world were vaccinated and no one was missed out. He cares so much about poor kids as we know. This was just the cover story to develop a vaccine tagging system for everyone on the planet. Gates has been funding the ID2020 'alliance' to do just that in league with other lovely people at Microsoft, GAVI, the Rockefeller Foundation, Accenture and IDEO.org. He said in interviews in March, 2020, before any 'vaccine' publicly existed, that the world must have a globalised digital certificate to track the 'virus' and who had been vaccinated. Gates knew from the start that the mRNA vaccines were coming and when they would come and that the plan was to tag the 'vaccinated' to marginalise the intelligent and stop them doing anything including travel. Evil just doesn't suffice. Gates was exposed for offering a $10 million bribe to the Nigerian House of Representatives to invoke compulsory 'Covid' vaccination of all Nigerians. Sara Cunial, a member of the Italian Parliament, called Gates a 'vaccine criminal'. She urged the Italian President to hand him over to the International Criminal Court for crimes against

humanity and condemned his plans to 'chip the human race' through ID2020.

You know it's a long-planned agenda when war criminal and Cult gofer Tony Blair is on the case. With the scale of arrogance only someone as dark as Blair can muster he said: 'Vaccination in the end is going to be your route to liberty.' Blair is a disgusting piece of work and he confirms that again. The media has given a lot of coverage to a bloke called Charlie Mullins, founder of London's biggest independent plumbing company, Pimlico Plumbers, who has said he won't employ anyone who has not been vaccinated or have them go to any home where people are not vaccinated. He said that if he had his way no one would be allowed to walk the streets if they have not been vaccinated. Gates was cheering at the time while I was alerting the white coats. The plan is that people will qualify for 'passports' for having the first two doses and then to keep it they will have to have all the follow ups and new ones for invented 'variants' until human genetics is transformed and many are dead who can't adjust to the changes. Hollywood celebrities – the usual propaganda stunt – are promoting something called the WELL Health-Safety Rating to verify that a building or space has 'taken the necessary steps to prioritize the health and safety of their staff, visitors and other stakeholders'. They included Lady Gaga, Jennifer Lopez, Michael B. Jordan, Robert DeNiro, Venus Williams, Wolfgang Puck, Deepak Chopra and 17th Surgeon General Richard Carmona. Yawn. WELL Health-Safety has big connections with China. Parent company Delos is headed by former Goldman Sachs partner Paul Scialla. This is another example – and we will see so many others – of using the excuse of 'health' to dictate the lives and activities of the population. I guess one confirmation of the 'safety' of buildings is that only 'vaccinated' people can go in, right?

Electronic concentration camps

I wrote decades ago about the plans to restrict travel and here we are for those who refuse to bow to tyranny. This can be achieved in one go with air travel if the aviation industry makes a blanket decree.

The ‘vaccine’ and guaranteed income are designed to be part of a global version of China’s social credit system which tracks behaviour 24/7 and awards or deletes ‘credits’ based on whether your behaviour is supported by the state or not. I mean your entire lifestyle – what you do, eat, say, everything. Once your credit score falls below a certain level consequences kick in. In China tens of millions have been denied travel by air and train because of this. All the locations and activities denied to refusers by the ‘vaccine’ passports will be included in one big mass ban on doing almost anything for those that don’t bow their head to government. It’s beyond fascist and a new term is required to describe its extremes – I guess fascist technocracy will have to do. The way the Chinese system of technological – technocratic – control is sweeping the West can be seen in the Los Angeles school system and is planned to be expanded worldwide. Every child is required to have a ‘Covid’-tracking app scanned daily before they can enter the classroom. The so-called Daily Pass tracking system is produced by Gates’ Microsoft which I’m sure will shock you rigid. The pass will be scanned using a barcode (one step from an inside-the-body barcode) and the information will include health checks, ‘Covid’ tests and vaccinations. Entry codes are for one specific building only and access will only be allowed if a student or teacher has a negative test with a test not testing for the ‘virus’, has no symptoms of anything alleged to be related to ‘Covid’ (symptoms from a range of other illness), and has a temperature under 100 degrees. No barcode, no entry, is planned to be the case for everywhere and not only schools.

Kids are being psychologically prepared to accept this as ‘normal’ their whole life which is why what they can impose in schools is so important to the Cult and its gofers. Long-time American freedom campaigner John Whitehead of the Rutherford Institute was not exaggerating when he said: ‘Databit by databit, we are building our own electronic concentration camps.’ Canada under its Cult gofer prime minister Justin Trudeau has taken a major step towards the real thing with people interned against their will if they test positive with a test not testing for the ‘virus’ when they arrive at a Canadian

airport. They are jailed in internment hotels often without food or water for long periods and with many doors failing to lock there have been sexual assaults. The interned are being charged sometimes $2,000 for the privilege of being abused in this way. Trudeau is fully on board with the Cult and says the 'Covid pandemic' has provided an opportunity for a global 'reset' to permanently change Western civilisation. His number two, Deputy Prime Minister Chrystia Freeland, is a trustee of the World Economic Forum and a Rhodes Scholar. The Trudeau family have long been servants of the Cult. See *The Biggest Secret* and Cathy O'Brien's book *Trance-Formation of America* for the horrific background to Trudeau's father Pierre Trudeau another Canadian prime minister. Hide your fascism behind the façade of a heart-on-the-sleeve liberal. It's a well-honed Cult technique.

What can the 'vaccine' *really* do?

We have a 'virus' never shown to exist and 'variants' of the 'virus' that have also never been shown to exist except, like the 'original', as computer-generated fictions. Even if you believe there's a 'virus' the 'case' to 'death' rate is in the region of 0.23 to 0.15 percent and those 'deaths' are concentrated among the very old around the same average age that people die anyway. In response to this lack of threat (in truth none) psychopaths and idiots, knowingly and unknowingly answering to Gates and the Cult, are seeking to 'vaccinate' every man, woman and child on Planet Earth. Clearly the 'vaccine' is not about 'Covid' – none of this ever has been. So what is it all about *really*? Why the desperation to infuse genetically-manipulating synthetic material into everyone through mRNA fraudulent 'vaccines' with the intent of doing this over and over with the excuses of 'variants' and other 'virus' inventions? Dr Sherri Tenpenny, an osteopathic medical doctor in the United States, has made herself an expert on vaccines and their effects as a vehement campaigner against their use. Tenpenny was board certified in emergency medicine, the director of a level two trauma centre for 12 years, and moved to Cleveland in 1996 to start an integrative

medicine practice which has treated patients from all 50 states and some 17 other countries. Weaning people off pharmaceutical drugs is a speciality.

She became interested in the consequences of vaccines after attending a meeting at the National Vaccine Information Center in Washington DC in 2000 where she 'sat through four days of listening to medical doctors and scientists and lawyers and parents of vaccine injured kids' and asked: 'What's going on?' She had never been vaccinated and never got ill while her father was given a list of vaccines to be in the military and was 'sick his entire life'. The experience added to her questions and she began to examine vaccine documents from the Centers for Disease Control (CDC). After reading the first one, the 1998 version of *The General Recommendations of Vaccination*, she thought: 'This is it?' The document was poorly written and bad science and Tenpenny began 20 years of research into vaccines that continues to this day. She began her research into 'Covid vaccines' in March, 2020, and she describes them as 'deadly'. For many, as we have seen, they already have been. Tenpenny said that in the first 30 days of the 'vaccine' rollout in the United States there had been more than 40,000 adverse events reported to the vaccine adverse event database. A document had been delivered to her the day before that was 172 pages long. 'We have over 40,000 adverse events; we have over 3,100 cases of [potentially deadly] anaphylactic shock; we have over 5,000 neurological reactions.' Effects ranged from headaches to numbness, dizziness and vertigo, to losing feeling in hands or feet and paraesthesia which is when limbs 'fall asleep' and people have the sensation of insects crawling underneath their skin. All this happened in the first 30 days and remember that only about *ten percent* (or far less) of adverse reactions and vaccine-related deaths are estimated to be officially reported. Tenpenny said:

> So can you think of one single product in any industry, any industry, for as long as products have been made on the planet that within 30 days we have 40,000 people complaining of side effects that not only is still on the market but … we've got paid actors telling us how great

they are for getting their vaccine. We're offering people $500 if they will just get their vaccine and we've got nurses and doctors going; 'I got the vaccine, I got the vaccine'.

Tenpenny said they were not going to be 'happy dancing folks' when they began to suffer Bell's palsy (facial paralysis), neuropathies, cardiac arrhythmias and autoimmune reactions that kill through a blood disorder. 'They're not going to be so happy, happy then, but we're never going to see pictures of those people' she said. Tenpenny described the 'vaccine' as 'a well-designed killing tool'.

No off-switch

Bad as the initial consequences had been Tenpenny said it would be maybe 14 months before we began to see the 'full ravage' of what is going to happen to the 'Covid vaccinated' with full-out consequences taking anything between two years and 20 years to show. You can understand why when you consider that variations of the 'Covid vaccine' use mRNA (messenger RNA) to in theory activate the immune system to produce protective antibodies without using the actual 'virus'. How can they when it's a computer program and they've never isolated what they claim is the 'real thing'? Instead they use *synthetic* mRNA. They are inoculating synthetic material into the body which through a technique known as the Trojan horse is absorbed into cells to change the nature of DNA. Human DNA is changed by an infusion of messenger RNA and with each new 'vaccine' of this type it is changed even more. Say so and you are banned by Cult Internet platforms. The contempt the contemptuous Mark Zuckerberg has for the truth and human health can be seen in an internal Facebook video leaked to the Project Veritas investigative team in which he said of the 'Covid vaccines': '… I share some caution on this because we just don't know the long term side-effects of basically modifying people's DNA and RNA.' At the same time this disgusting man's Facebook was censoring and banning anyone saying exactly the same. He must go before a Nuremberg trial for crimes against humanity when he *knows* that he

is censoring legitimate concerns and denying the right of informed consent on behalf of the Cult that owns him. People have been killed and damaged by the very 'vaccination' technique he cast doubt on himself when they may not have had the 'vaccine' with access to information that he denied them. The plan is to have at least annual 'Covid vaccinations', add others to deal with invented 'variants', and change all other vaccines into the mRNA system. Pfizer executives told shareholders at a virtual Barclays Global Healthcare Conference in March, 2021, that the public may need a third dose of 'Covid vaccine', plus regular yearly boosters and the company planned to hike prices to milk the profits in a 'significant opportunity for our vaccine'. These are the professional liars, cheats and opportunists who are telling you their 'vaccine' is safe. Given this volume of mRNA planned to be infused into the human body and its ability to then replicate we will have a transformation of human genetics from biological to synthetic biological – exactly the long-time Cult plan for reasons we'll see – and many will die. Sherri Tenpenny said of this replication:

> It's like having an on-button but no off-button and that whole mechanism … they actually give it a name and they call it the Trojan horse mechanism, because it allows that [synthetic] virus and that piece of that [synthetic] virus to get inside of your cells, start to replicate and even get inserted into other parts of your DNA as a Trojan-horse.

Ask the overwhelming majority of people who have the 'vaccine' what they know about the contents and what they do and they would reply: 'The government says it will stop me getting the virus.' Governments give that false impression on purpose to increase take-up. You can read Sherri Tenpenny's detailed analysis of the health consequences in her blog at Vaxxter.com, but in summary these are some of them. She highlights the statement by Bill Gates about how human beings can become their own 'vaccine manufacturing machine'. The man is insane. ['Vaccine'-generated] 'antibodies' carry synthetic messenger RNA into the cells and the damage starts, Tenpenny contends, and she says that lungs can be adversely affected through varying degrees of pus and bleeding which

obviously affects breathing and would be dubbed 'Covid-19'. Even more sinister was the impact of 'antibodies' on macrophages, a white blood cell of the immune system. They consist of Type 1 and Type 2 which have very different functions. She said Type 1 are 'hyper-vigilant' white blood cells which 'gobble up' bacteria etc. However, in doing so, this could cause inflammation and in extreme circumstances be fatal. She says these affects are mitigated by Type 2 macrophages which kick in to calm down the system and stop it going rogue. They clear up dead tissue debris and reduce inflammation that the Type 1 'fire crews' have caused. Type 1 kills the infection and Type 2 heals the damage, she says. This is her punchline with regard to 'Covid vaccinations': She says that mRNA 'antibodies' block Type 2 macrophages by attaching to them and deactivating them. This meant that when the Type 1 response was triggered by infection there was nothing to stop that getting out of hand by calming everything down. There's an on-switch, but no off-switch, she says. What follows can be 'over and out, see you when I see you'.

Genetic suicide

Tenpenny also highlights the potential for autoimmune disease – the body attacking itself – which has been associated with vaccines since they first appeared. Infusing a synthetic foreign substance into cells could cause the immune system to react in a panic believing that the body is being overwhelmed by an invader (it is) and the consequences can again be fatal. There is an autoimmune response known as a 'cytokine storm' which I have likened to a homeowner panicked by an intruder and picking up a gun to shoot randomly in all directions before turning the fire on himself. The immune system unleashes a storm of inflammatory response called cytokines to a threat and the body commits hara-kiri. The lesson is that you mess with the body's immune response at your peril and these 'vaccines' seriously – fundamentally – mess with immune response. Tenpenny refers to a consequence called anaphylactic shock which is a severe and highly dangerous allergic reaction when the immune system

floods the body with chemicals. She gives the example of having a bee sting which primes the immune system and makes it sensitive to those chemicals. When people are stung again maybe years later the immune response can be so powerful that it leads to anaphylactic shock. Tenpenny relates this 'shock' with regard to the 'Covid vaccine' to something called polyethylene glycol or PEG. Enormous numbers of people have become sensitive to this over decades of use in a whole range of products and processes including food, drink, skin creams and 'medicine'. Studies have claimed that some 72 percent of people have antibodies triggered by PEG compared with two percent in the 1960s and allergic hypersensitive reactions to this become a gathering cause for concern. Tenpenny points out that the 'mRNA vaccine' is coated in a 'bubble' of polyethylene glycol which has the potential to cause anaphylactic shock through immune sensitivity. Many reports have appeared of people reacting this way after having the 'Covid vaccine'. What do we think is going to happen as humanity has more and more of these 'vaccines'? Tenpenny said: 'All these pictures we have seen with people with these rashes … these weepy rashes, big reactions on their arms and things like that – it's an acute allergic reaction most likely to the polyethylene glycol that you've been previously primed and sensitised to.'

Those who have not studied the conspiracy and its perpetrators at length might think that making the population sensitive to PEG and then putting it in these 'vaccines' is just a coincidence. It is not. It is instead testament to how carefully and coldly-planned current events have been and the scale of the conspiracy we are dealing with. Tenpenny further explains that the 'vaccine' mRNA procedure can breach the blood-brain barrier which protects the brain from toxins and other crap that will cause malfunction. In this case they could make two proteins corrupt brain function to cause Amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS) , a progressive nervous system disease leading to loss of muscle control, and frontal lobe degeneration – Alzheimer's and dementia. Immunologist J. Bart Classon published a paper connecting mRNA 'vaccines' to prion

disease which can lead to Alzheimer's and other forms of neurogenerative disease while others have pointed out the potential to affect the placenta in ways that make women infertile. This will become highly significant in the next chapter when I will discuss other aspects of this non-vaccine that relate to its nanotechnology and transmission from the injected to the uninjected.

Qualified in idiocy

Tenpenny describes how research has confirmed that these 'vaccine'-generated antibodies can interact with a range of other tissues in the body and attack many other organs including the lungs. 'This means that if you have a hundred people standing in front of you that all got this shot they could have a hundred different symptoms.' Anyone really think that Cult gofers like the Queen, Tony Blair, Christopher Whitty, Anthony Fauci, and all the other psychopaths have really had this 'vaccine' in the pictures we've seen? Not a bloody chance. Why don't doctors all tell us about all these dangers and consequences of the 'Covid vaccine'? Why instead do they encourage and pressure patients to have the shot? Don't let's think for a moment that doctors and medical staff can't be stupid, lazy, and psychopathic and that's without the financial incentives to give the jab. Tenpenny again:

> Some people are going to die from the vaccine directly but a large number of people are going to start to get horribly sick and get all kinds of autoimmune diseases 42 days to maybe a year out. What are they going to do, these stupid doctors who say; 'Good for you for getting that vaccine.' What are they going to say; 'Oh, it must be a mutant, we need to give an extra dose of that vaccine.'
>
> Because now the vaccine, instead of one dose or two doses we need three or four because the stupid physicians aren't taking the time to learn anything about it. If I can learn this sitting in my living room reading a 19 page paper and several others so can they. There's nothing special about me, I just take the time to do it.

Remember how Sara Kayat, the NHS and TV doctor, said that the 'Covid vaccine' would '100 percent prevent hospitalisation and death'. Doctors can be idiots like every other profession and they

should not be worshipped as infallible. They are not and far from it. Behind many medical and scientific 'experts' lies an uninformed prat trying to hide themselves from you although in the 'Covid' era many have failed to do so as with UK narrative-repeating 'TV doctor' Hilary Jones. Pushing back against the minority of proper doctors and scientists speaking out against the 'vaccine' has been the entire edifice of the Cult global state in the form of governments, medical systems, corporations, mainstream media, Silicon Valley, and an army of compliant doctors, medical staff and scientists willing to say anything for money and to enhance their careers by promoting the party line. If you do that you are an 'expert' and if you won't you are an 'anti-vaxxer' and 'Covidiot'. The pressure to be 'vaccinated' is incessant. We have even had reports claiming that the 'vaccine' can help cure cancer and Alzheimer's and make the lame walk. I am waiting for the announcement that it can bring you coffee in the morning and cook your tea. Just as the symptoms of 'Covid' seem to increase by the week so have the miracles of the 'vaccine'. American supermarket giant Kroger Co. offered nearly 500,000 employees in 35 states a $100 bonus for having the 'vaccine' while donut chain Krispy Kreme promised 'vaccinated' customers a free glazed donut every day for the rest of 2021. Have your DNA changed and you will get a doughnut although we might not have to give you them for long. Such offers and incentives confirm the desperation.

Perhaps the worse vaccine-stunt of them all was UK 'Health' Secretary Matt-the-prat Hancock on live TV after watching a clip of someone being 'vaccinated' when the roll-out began. Hancock faked tears so badly it was embarrassing. Brain-of-Britain Piers Morgan, the lockdown-supporting, 'vaccine' supporting, 'vaccine' passport-supporting, TV host played along with Hancock – 'You're quite emotional about that' he said in response to acting so atrocious it would have been called out at a school nativity which will presumably today include Mary and Jesus in masks, wise men keeping their camels six feet apart, and shepherds under tent arrest. System-serving Morgan tweeted this: 'Love the idea of covid vaccine passports for everywhere: flights, restaurants, clubs, football, gyms,

shops etc. It's time covid-denying, anti-vaxxer loonies had their bullsh*t bluff called & bar themselves from going anywhere that responsible citizens go.' If only I could aspire to his genius. To think that Morgan, who specialises in shouting over anyone he disagrees with, was lauded as a free speech hero when he lost his job after storming off the set of his live show like a child throwing his dolly out of the pram. If he is a free speech hero we are in real trouble. I have no idea what 'bullsh*t' means, by the way, the * throws me completely.

The Cult is desperate to infuse its synthetic DNA-changing concoction into everyone and has been using every lie, trick and intimidation to do so. The question of '*Why*?' we shall now address.

CHAPTER TEN

Human 2.0

I believe that at the end of the century the use of words and general educated opinion will have altered so much that one will be able to speak of machines thinking without expecting to be contradicted –
Alan Turing (1912-1954), the 'Father of artificial intelligence'

I have been exposing for decades the plan to transform the human body from a biological to a synthetic-biological state. The new human that I will call Human 2.0 is planned to be connected to artificial intelligence and a global AI 'Smart Grid' that would operate as one global system in which AI would control everything from your fridge to your heating system to your car to your mind. Humans would no longer be 'human', but post-human and sub-human, with their thinking and emotional processes replaced by AI.

What I said sounded crazy and beyond science fiction and I could understand that. To any balanced, rational, mind it *is* crazy. Today, however, that world is becoming reality and it puts the 'Covid vaccine' into its true context. Ray Kurzweil is the ultra-Zionist 'computer scientist, inventor and futurist' and co-founder of the Singularity University. Singularity refers to the merging of humans with machines or 'transhumanism'. Kurzweil has said humanity would be connected to the cyber 'cloud' in the period of the ever-recurring year of 2030:

Our thinking … will be a hybrid of biological and non-biological thinking … humans will be able to extend their limitations and 'think in the cloud' … We're going to put gateways to the

cloud in our brains ... We're going to gradually merge and enhance ourselves ... In my view, that's the nature of being human – we transcend our limitations. As the technology becomes vastly superior to what we are then the small proportion that is still human gets smaller and smaller and smaller until it's just utterly negligible.

They are trying to sell this end-of-humanity-as-we-know-it as the next stage of 'evolution' when we become super-human and 'like the gods'. They are lying to you. Shocked, eh? The population, and again especially the young, have been manipulated into addiction to technologies designed to enslave them for life. First they induced an addiction to smartphones (holdables); next they moved to technology on the body (wearables); and then began the invasion of the body (implantables). I warned way back about the plan for microchipped people and we are now entering that era. We should not be diverted into thinking that this refers only to chips we can see. Most important are the nanochips known as smart dust, neural dust and nanobots which are far too small to be seen by the human eye. Nanotechnology is everywhere, increasingly in food products, and released into the atmosphere by the geoengineering of the skies funded by Bill Gates to 'shut out the Sun' and 'save the planet from global warming'. Gates has been funding a project to spray millions of tonnes of chalk (calcium carbonate) into the stratosphere over Sweden to 'dim the Sun' and cool the Earth. Scientists warned the move could be disastrous for weather systems in ways no one can predict and opposition led to the Swedish space agency announcing that the 'experiment' would not be happening as planned in the summer of 2021; but it shows where the Cult is going with dimming the impact of the Sun and there's an associated plan to change the planet's atmosphere. Who gives psychopath Gates the right to dictate to the entire human race and dismantle planetary systems? The world will not be safe while this man is at large.

The global warming hoax has made the Sun, like the gas of life, something to fear when both are essential to good health and human survival (more inversion). The body transforms sunlight into vital vitamin D through a process involving … *cholesterol*. This is the cholesterol we are also told to fear. We are urged to take Big Pharma

statin drugs to reduce cholesterol and it's all systematic. Reducing cholesterol means reducing vitamin D uptake with all the multiple health problems that will cause. At least if you take statins long term it saves the government from having to pay you a pension. The delivery system to block sunlight is widely referred to as chemtrails although these have a much deeper agenda, too. They appear at first to be contrails or condensation trails streaming from aircraft into cold air at high altitudes. Contrails disperse very quickly while chemtrails do not and spread out across the sky before eventually their content falls to earth. Many times I have watched aircraft cross-cross a clear blue sky releasing chemtrails until it looks like a cloudy day. Chemtrails contain many things harmful to humans and the natural world including toxic heavy metals, aluminium (see Alzheimer's) and nanotechnology. Ray Kurzweil reveals the reason without actually saying so: 'Nanobots will infuse all the matter around us with information. Rocks, trees, everything will become these intelligent creatures.' How do you deliver that? *From the sky*. Self-replicating nanobots would connect everything to the Smart Grid. The phenomenon of Morgellons disease began in the chemtrail era and the correlation has led to it being dubbed the 'chemtrail disease'. Self-replicating fibres appear in the body that can be pulled out through the skin. Morgellons fibres continue to grow outside the body and have a form of artificial intelligence. I cover this at greater length in *Phantom Self*.

'Vaccine' operating system

'Covid vaccines' with their self-replicating synthetic material are also designed to make the connection between humanity and Kurzweil's 'cloud'. American doctor and dedicated campaigner for truth, Carrie Madej, an Internal Medicine Specialist in Georgia with more than 20 years medical experience, has highlighted the nanotechnology aspect of the fake 'vaccines'. She explains how one of the components in at least the Moderna and Pfizer synthetic potions are 'lipid nanoparticles' which are 'like little tiny computer bits' – a 'sci-fi substance' known as nanobots and hydrogel which can be 'triggered

at any moment to deliver its payload' and act as 'biosensors'. The synthetic substance had 'the ability to accumulate data from your body like your breathing, your respiration, thoughts and emotions, all kind of things' and each syringe could carry a *million* nanobots:

This substance because it's like little bits of computers in your body, crazy, but it's true, it can do that, [and] obviously has the ability to act through Wi-Fi. It can receive and transmit energy, messages, frequencies or impulses. That issue has never been addressed by these companies. What does that do to the human?

Just imagine getting this substance in you and it can react to things all around you, the 5G, your smart device, your phones, what is happening with that? What if something is triggering it, too, like an impulse, a frequency? We have something completely foreign in the human body.

Madej said her research revealed that electromagnetic (EMF) frequencies emitted by phones and other devices had increased dramatically in the same period of the 'vaccine' rollout and she was seeing more people with radiation problems as 5G and other electromagnetic technology was expanded and introduced to schools and hospitals. She said she was 'floored with the EMF coming off' the devices she checked. All this makes total sense and syncs with my own work of decades when you think that Moderna refers in documents to its mRNA 'vaccine' as an 'operating system':

Recognizing the broad potential of mRNA science, we set out to create an mRNA technology platform that functions very much like an operating system on a computer. It is designed so that it can plug and play interchangeably with different programs. In our case, the 'program' or 'app' is our mRNA drug – the unique mRNA sequence that codes for a protein …

… Our MRNA Medicines – 'The 'Software Of Life': When we have a concept for a new mRNA medicine and begin research, fundamental components are already in place. Generally, the only thing that changes from one potential mRNA medicine to another is the coding region – the actual genetic code that instructs ribosomes to make protein. Utilizing these instruction sets gives our investigational mRNA medicines a software-like quality. We also have the ability to combine different mRNA sequences encoding for different proteins in a single mRNA investigational medicine.

Who needs a real 'virus' when you can create a computer version to justify infusing your operating system into the entire human race on the road to making living, breathing people into cyborgs? What is missed with the 'vaccines' is the *digital* connection between synthetic material and the body that I highlighted earlier with the study that hacked a computer with human DNA. On one level the body is digital, based on mathematical codes, and I'll have more about that in the next chapter. Those who ridiculously claim that mRNA 'vaccines' are not designed to change human genetics should explain the words of Dr Tal Zaks, chief medical officer at Moderna, in a 2017 TED talk. He said that over the last 30 years 'we've been living this phenomenal digital scientific revolution, and I'm here today to tell you, that we are actually *hacking the software of life*, and that it's changing the way we think about prevention and treatment of disease':

In every cell there's this thing called messenger RNA, or mRNA for short, that transmits the critical information from the DNA in our genes to the protein, which is really the stuff we're all made out of. This is the critical information that determines what the cell will do. So we think about it as an operating system. So if you could change that, if you could introduce a line of code, or change a line of code, it turns out, that has profound implications for everything, from the flu to cancer.

Zaks should more accurately have said that this has profound implications for the human genetic code and the nature of DNA. Communications within the body go both ways and not only one. But, hey, no, the 'Covid vaccine' will not affect your genetics. Cult fact-checkers say so even though the man who helped to develop the mRNA technique says that it does. Zaks said in 2017:

If you think about what it is we're trying to do. We've taken information and our understanding of that information and how that information is transmitted in a cell, and we've taken our understanding of medicine and how to make drugs, and we're fusing the two. We think of it as information therapy.

I have been writing for decades that the body is an information field communicating with itself and the wider world. This is why

radiation which is information can change the information field of body and mind through phenomena like 5G and change their nature and function. 'Information therapy' means to change the body's information field and change the way it operates. DNA is a receiver-transmitter of information and can be mutated by information like mRNA synthetic messaging. Technology to do this has been ready and waiting in the underground bases and other secret projects to be rolled out when the 'Covid' hoax was played. 'Trials' of such short and irrelevant duration were only for public consumption. When they say the 'vaccine' is 'experimental' that is not true. It may appear to be 'experimental' to those who don't know what's going on, but the trials have already been done to ensure the Cult gets the result it desires. Zaks said that it took decades to sequence the human genome, completed in 2003, but now they could do it in a week. By 'they' he means scientists operating in the public domain. In the secret projects they were sequencing the genome in a week long before even 2003.

Deluge of mRNA

Highly significantly the Moderna document says the guiding premise is that if using mRNA as a medicine works for one disease then it should work for many diseases. They were leveraging the flexibility afforded by their platform and the fundamental role mRNA plays in protein synthesis to pursue mRNA medicines for a broad spectrum of diseases. Moderna is confirming what I was saying through 2020 that multiple 'vaccines' were planned for 'Covid' (and later invented 'variants') and that previous vaccines would be converted to the mRNA system to infuse the body with massive amounts of genetically-manipulating synthetic material to secure a transformation to a synthetic-biological state. The 'vaccines' are designed to kill stunning numbers as part of the long-exposed Cult depopulation agenda and transform the rest. Given this is the goal you can appreciate why there is such hysterical demand for every human to be 'vaccinated' for an alleged 'disease' that has an estimated 'infection' to 'death' ratio of 0.23-0.15 percent. As I write

children are being given the 'vaccine' in trials (their parents are a disgrace) and ever-younger people are being offered the vaccine for a 'virus' that even if you believe it exists has virtually zero chance of harming them. Horrific effects of the 'trials' on a 12-year-old girl were revealed by a family member to be serious brain and gastric problems that included a bowel obstruction and the inability to swallow liquids or solids. She was unable to eat or drink without throwing up, had extreme pain in her back, neck and abdomen, and was paralysed from the waist down which stopped her urinating unaided. When the girl was first taken to hospital doctors said it was all in her mind. She was signed up for the 'trial' by her parents for whom no words suffice. None of this 'Covid vaccine' insanity makes any sense unless you see what the 'vaccine' really is – a body-changer. Synthetic biology or 'SynBio' is a fast-emerging and expanding scientific discipline which includes everything from genetic and molecular engineering to electrical and computer engineering. Synthetic biology is defined in these ways:

- A multidisciplinary area of research that seeks to create new biological parts, devices, and systems, or to redesign systems that are already found in nature.

- The use of a mixture of physical engineering and genetic engineering to create new (and therefore synthetic) life forms.

- An emerging field of research that aims to combine the knowledge and methods of biology, engineering and related disciplines in the design of chemically-synthesized DNA to create organisms with novel or enhanced characteristics and traits (synthetic organisms including humans).

We now have synthetic blood, skin, organs and limbs being developed along with synthetic body parts produced by 3D printers. These are all elements of the synthetic human programme and this comment by Kurzweil's co-founder of the Singularity University,

Peter Diamandis, can be seen in a whole new light with the 'Covid' hoax and the sanctions against those that refuse the 'vaccine':

Anybody who is going to be resisting the progress forward [to transhumanism] is going to be resisting evolution and, fundamentally, they will die out. It's not a matter of whether it's good or bad. It's going to happen.

'Resisting evolution'? What absolute bollocks. The arrogance of these people is without limit. His 'it's going to happen' mantra is another way of saying 'resistance is futile' to break the spirit of those pushing back and we must not fall for it. Getting this genetically-transforming 'vaccine' into everyone is crucial to the Cult plan for total control and the desperation to achieve that is clear for anyone to see. Vaccine passports are a major factor in this and they, too, are a form of resistance is futile. It's NOT. The paper funded by the Rockefeller Foundation for the 2013 'health conference' in China said:

We will interact more with artificial intelligence. The use of robotics, bio-engineering to augment human functioning is already well underway and will advance. Re-engineering of humans into potentially separate and unequal forms through genetic engineering or mixed human-robots raises debates on ethics and equality.

A new demography is projected to emerge after 2030 [that year again] of technologies (robotics, genetic engineering, nanotechnology) producing robots, engineered organisms, 'nanobots' and artificial intelligence (AI) that can self-replicate. Debates will grow on the implications of an impending reality of human designed life.

What is happening today is so long planned. The world army enforcing the will of the world government is intended to be a robot army, not a human one. Today's military and its technologically 'enhanced' troops, pilotless planes and driverless vehicles are just stepping stones to that end. Human soldiers are used as Cult fodder and its time they woke up to that and worked for the freedom of the population instead of their own destruction and their family's destruction – the same with the police. Join us and let's sort this out. The phenomenon of enforce my own destruction is widespread in the 'Covid' era with Woker 'luvvies' in the acting and entertainment

industries supporting 'Covid' rules which have destroyed their profession and the same with those among the public who put signs on the doors of their businesses 'closed due to Covid – stay safe' when many will never reopen. It's a form of masochism and most certainly insanity.

Transgender = transhumanism

When something explodes out of nowhere and is suddenly everywhere it is always the Cult agenda and so it is with the tidal wave of claims and demands that have infiltrated every aspect of society under the heading of 'transgenderism'. The term 'trans' is so 'in' and this is the dictionary definition:

A prefix meaning 'across', 'through', occurring … in loanwords from Latin, used in particular for denoting movement or conveyance from place to place (transfer; transmit; transplant) or complete change (transform; transmute), or to form adjectives meaning 'crossing', 'on the other side of', or 'going beyond' the place named (transmontane; transnational; trans-Siberian).

Transgender means to go beyond gender and transhuman means to go beyond human. Both are aspects of the Cult plan to transform the human body to a synthetic state with *no gender*. Human 2.0 is not designed to procreate and would be produced technologically with no need for parents. The new human would mean the end of parents and so men, and increasingly women, are being targeted for the deletion of their rights and status. Parental rights are disappearing at an ever-quickening speed for the same reason. The new human would have no need for men or women when there is no procreation and no gender. Perhaps the transgender movement that appears to be in a permanent state of frenzy might now contemplate on how it is being used. This was never about transgender rights which are only the interim excuse for confusing gender, particularly in the young, on the road to *fusing* gender. Transgender activism is not an end; it is a *means* to an end. We see again the technique of creative destruction in which you destroy the status quo to 'build back better' in the form that you want. The gender status quo had to be

destroyed by persuading the Cult-created Woke mentality to believe that you can have 100 genders or more. A programme for 9 to 12 year olds produced by the Cult-owned BBC promoted the 100 genders narrative. The very idea may be the most monumental nonsense, but it is not what is true that counts, only what you can make people *believe* is true. Once the gender of 2 + 2 = 4 has been dismantled through indoctrination, intimidation and 2 + 2 = 5 then the new no-gender normal can take its place with Human 2.0. Aldous Huxley revealed the plan in his prophetic *Brave New World* in 1932:

> Natural reproduction has been done away with and children are created, decanted', and raised in 'hatcheries and conditioning centres'. From birth, people are genetically designed to fit into one of five castes, which are further split into 'Plus' and 'Minus' members and designed to fulfil predetermined positions within the social and economic strata of the World State.

How could Huxley know this in 1932? For the same reason George Orwell knew about the Big Brother state in 1948, Cult insiders I have quoted knew about it in 1969, and I have known about it since the early 1990s. If you are connected to the Cult or you work your balls off to uncover the plan you can predict the future. The process is simple. If there is a plan for the world and nothing intervenes to stop it then it will happen. Thus if you communicate the plan ahead of time you are perceived to have predicted the future, but you haven't. You have revealed the plan which without intervention will become the human future. The whole reason I have done what I have is to alert enough people to inspire an intervention and maybe at last that time has come with the Cult and its intentions now so obvious to anyone with a brain in working order.

The future is here

Technological wombs that Huxley described to replace parent procreation are already being developed and they are only the projects we know about in the public arena. Israeli scientists told *The Times of Israel* in March, 2021, that they have grown 250-cell embryos

into mouse foetuses with fully formed organs using artificial wombs in a development they say could pave the way for gestating humans outside the womb. Professor Jacob Hanna of the Weizmann Institute of Science said:

We took mouse embryos from the mother at day five of development, when they are just of 250 cells, and had them in the incubator from day five until day 11, by which point they had grown all their organs.

By day 11 they make their own blood and have a beating heart, a fully developed brain. Anybody would look at them and say, 'this is clearly a mouse foetus with all the characteristics of a mouse.' It's gone from being a ball of cells to being an advanced foetus.

A special liquid is used to nourish embryo cells in a laboratory dish and they float on the liquid to duplicate the first stage of embryonic development. The incubator creates all the right conditions for its development, Hanna said. The liquid gives the embryo 'all the nutrients, hormones and sugars they need' along with a custom-made electronic incubator which controls gas concentration, pressure and temperature. The cutting-edge in the underground bases and other secret locations will be light years ahead of that, however, and this was reported by the London *Guardian* in 2017:

We are approaching a biotechnological breakthrough. Ectogenesis, the invention of a complete external womb, could completely change the nature of human reproduction. In April this year, researchers at the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia announced their development of an artificial womb.

The article was headed 'Artificial wombs could soon be a reality. What will this mean for women?' What would it mean for children is an even bigger question. No mother to bond with only a machine in preparation for a life of soulless interaction and control in a world governed by machines (see the *Matrix* movies). Now observe the calculated manipulations of the 'Covid' hoax as human interaction and warmth has been curtailed by distancing, isolation and fear with people communicating via machines on a scale never seen before.

These are all dots in the same picture as are all the personal assistants, gadgets and children's toys through which kids and adults communicate with AI as if it is human. The AI 'voice' on Sat-Nav should be included. All these things are psychological preparation for the Cult endgame. Before you can make a physical connection with AI you have to make a psychological connection and that is what people are being conditioned to do with this ever gathering human-AI interaction. Movies and TV programmes depicting the transhuman, robot dystopia relate to a phenomenon known as 'pre-emptive programming' in which the world that is planned is portrayed everywhere in movies, TV and advertising. This is conditioning the conscious and subconscious mind to become familiar with the planned reality to dilute resistance when it happens for real. What would have been a shock such is the change is made less so. We have young children put on the road to transgender transition surgery with puberty blocking drugs at an age when they could never be able to make those life-changing decisions.

Rachel Levine, a professor of paediatrics and psychiatry who believes in treating children this way, became America's highest-ranked openly-transgender official when she was confirmed as US Assistant Secretary at the Department of Health and Human Services after being nominated by Joe Biden (the Cult). Activists and governments press for laws to deny parents a say in their children's transition process so the kids can be isolated and manipulated into agreeing to irreversible medical procedures. A Canadian father Robert Hoogland was denied bail by the Vancouver Supreme Court in 2021 and remained in jail for breaching a court order that he stay silent over his young teenage daughter, a minor, who was being offered life-changing hormone therapy without parental consent. At the age of 12 the girl's 'school counsellor' said she may be transgender, referred her to a doctor and told the school to treat her like a boy. This is another example of state-serving schools imposing ever more control over children's lives while parents have ever less.

Contemptible and extreme child abuse is happening all over the world as the Cult gender-fusion operation goes into warp-speed.

Why the war on men – and now women?

The question about what artificial wombs mean for women should rightly be asked. The answer can be seen in the deletion of women's rights involving sport, changing rooms, toilets and status in favour of people in male bodies claiming to identify as women. I can identify as a mountain climber, but it doesn't mean I can climb a mountain any more than a biological man can be a biological woman. To believe so is a triumph of belief over factual reality which is the very perceptual basis of everything Woke. Women's sport is being destroyed by allowing those with male bodies who say they identify as female to 'compete' with girls and women. Male body 'women' dominate 'women's' competition with their greater muscle mass, bone density, strength and speed. With that disadvantage sport for women loses all meaning. To put this in perspective nearly 300 American high school boys can run faster than the quickest woman sprinter in the world. Women are seeing their previously protected spaces invaded by male bodies simply because they claim to identify as women. That's all they need to do to access all women's spaces and activities under the Biden 'Equality Act' that destroys equality for women with the usual Orwellian Woke inversion. Male sex offenders have already committed rapes in women's prisons after claiming to identify as women to get them transferred. Does this not matter to the Woke 'equality' hypocrites? Not in the least. What matters to Cult manipulators and funders behind transgender activists is to advance gender fusion on the way to the no-gender 'human'. When you are seeking to impose transparent nonsense like this, or the 'Covid' hoax, the only way the nonsense can prevail is through censorship and intimidation of dissenters, deletion of factual information, and programming of the unquestioning, bewildered and naive. You don't have to scan the world for long to see that all these things are happening.

Many women's rights organisations have realised that rights and status which took such a long time to secure are being eroded and that it is systematic. Kara Dansky of the global Women's Human Rights Campaign said that Biden's transgender executive order immediately he took office, subsequent orders, and Equality Act legislation that followed 'seek to erase women and girls in the law as a category'. *Exactly*. I said during the long ago-started war on men (in which many women play a crucial part) that this was going to turn into a war on them. The Cult is phasing out *both* male and female genders. To get away with that they are brought into conflict so they are busy fighting each other while the Cult completes the job with no unity of response. Unity, people, *unity*. We need unity everywhere. Transgender is the only show in town as the big step towards the no-gender human. It's not about rights for transgender people and never has been. Woke political correctness is deleting words relating to genders to the same end. Wokers believe this is to be 'inclusive' when the opposite is true. They are deleting words describing gender because gender *itself* is being deleted by Human 2.0. Terms like 'man', 'woman', 'mother' and 'father' are being deleted in the universities and other institutions to be replaced by the *no*-gender, not trans-gender, 'individuals' and 'guardians'. Women's rights campaigner Maria Keffler of Partners for Ethical Care said: 'Children are being taught from kindergarten upward that some boys have a vagina, some girls have a penis, and that kids can be any gender they want to be.' Do we really believe that suddenly countries all over the world at the same time had the idea of having drag queens go into schools or read transgender stories to very young children in the local library? It's coldly-calculated confusion of gender on the way to the fusion of gender. Suzanne Vierling, a psychologist from Southern California, made another important point:

Yesterday's slave woman who endured gynecological medical experiments is today's girl-child being butchered in a booming gender-transitioning sector. Ovaries removed, pushing her into menopause and osteoporosis, uncharted territory, and parents' rights and authority decimated.

The erosion of parental rights is a common theme in line with the Cult plans to erase the very concept of parents and 'ovaries removed, pushing her into menopause' means what? Those born female lose the ability to have children – another way to discontinue humanity as we know it.

Eliminating Human 1.0 (before our very eyes)

To pave the way for Human 2.0 you must phase out Human 1.0. This is happening through plummeting sperm counts and making women infertile through an onslaught of chemicals, radiation (including smartphones in pockets of men) and mRNA 'vaccines'. Common agriculture pesticides are also having a devastating impact on human fertility. I have been tracking collapsing sperm counts in the books for a long time and in 2021 came a book by fertility scientist and reproductive epidemiologist Shanna Swan, *Count Down: How Our Modern World Is Threatening Sperm Counts, Altering Male and Female Reproductive Development and Imperiling the Future of the Human Race*. She reports how the global fertility rate dropped by *half* between 1960 and 2016 with America's birth rate 16 percent below where it needs to be to sustain the population. Women are experiencing declining egg quality, more miscarriages, and more couples suffer from infertility. Other findings were an increase in erectile dysfunction, infant boys developing more genital abnormalities, male problems with conception, and plunging levels of the male hormone testosterone which would explain why so many men have lost their backbone and masculinity. This has been very evident during the 'Covid' hoax when women have been prominent among the Pushbackers and big strapping blokes have bowed their heads, covered their faces with a nappy and quietly submitted. Mind control expert Cathy O'Brien also points to how global education introduced the concept of 'we're all winners' in sport and classrooms: 'Competition was defused, and it in turn defused a sense of fighting back.' This is another version of the 'equity' doctrine in which you drive down rather than raise up. What a contrast in Cult-controlled China with its global ambitions

where the government published plans in January, 2021, to 'cultivate masculinity' in boys from kindergarten through to high school in the face of a 'masculinity crisis'. A government adviser said boys would be soon become 'delicate, timid and effeminate' unless action was taken. Don't expect any similar policy in the targeted West. A 2006 study showed that a 65-year-old man in 2002 had testosterone levels *15 percent* lower than a 65-year-old man in 1987 while a 2020 study found a similar story with young adults and adolescents. Men are getting prescriptions for testosterone replacement therapy which causes an even greater drop in sperm count with up to 99 percent seeing sperm counts drop to zero during the treatment. More sperm is defective and malfunctioning with some having two heads or not pursuing an egg.

A class of *synthetic* chemicals known as phthalates are being blamed for the decline. These are found everywhere in plastics, shampoos, cosmetics, furniture, flame retardants, personal care products, pesticides, canned foods and even receipts. Why till receipts? Everyone touches them. Let no one delude themselves that all this is not systematic to advance the long-time agenda for human body transformation. Phthalates mimic hormones and disrupt the hormone balance causing testosterone to fall and genital birth defects in male infants. Animals and fish have been affected in the same way due to phthalates and other toxins in rivers. When fish turn gay or change sex through chemicals in rivers and streams it is a pointer to why there has been such an increase in gay people and the sexually confused. It doesn't matter to me what sexuality people choose to be, but if it's being affected by chemical pollution and consumption then we need to know. Does anyone really think that this is not connected to the transgender agenda, the war on men and the condemnation of male 'toxic masculinity'? You watch this being followed by 'toxic femininity'. It's already happening. When breastfeeding becomes 'chest-feeding', pregnant women become pregnant people along with all the other Woke claptrap you know that the world is going insane and there's a Cult scam in progress. Transgender activists are promoting the Cult agenda while Cult

billionaires support and fund the insanity as they laugh themselves to sleep at the sheer stupidity for which humans must be infamous in galaxies far, far away.

'Covid vaccines' and female infertility

We can now see why the 'vaccine' has been connected to potential infertility in women. Dr Michael Yeadon, former Vice President and Chief Scientific Advisor at Pfizer, and Dr Wolfgang Wodarg in Germany, filed a petition with the European Medicines Agency in December, 2020, urging them to stop trials for the Pfizer/BioNTech shot and all other mRNA trials until further studies had been done. They were particularly concerned about possible effects on fertility with 'vaccine'-produced antibodies attacking the protein Syncytin-1 which is responsible for developing the placenta. The result would be infertility 'of indefinite duration' in women who have the 'vaccine' with the placenta failing to form. Section 10.4.2 of the Pfizer/BioNTech trial protocol says that pregnant women or those who might become so should not have mRNA shots. Section 10.4 warns men taking mRNA shots to 'be abstinent from heterosexual intercourse' and not to donate sperm. The UK government said that it *did not know* if the mRNA procedure had an effect on fertility. *Did not know?* These people have to go to jail. UK government advice did not recommend at the start that pregnant women had the shot and said they should avoid pregnancy for at least two months after 'vaccination'. The 'advice' was later updated to pregnant women should only have the 'vaccine' if the benefits outweighed the risks to mother and foetus. What the hell is that supposed to mean? Then 'spontaneous abortions' began to appear and rapidly increase on the adverse reaction reporting schemes which include only a fraction of adverse reactions. Thousands and ever-growing numbers of 'vaccinated' women are describing changes to their menstrual cycle with heavier blood flow, irregular periods and menstruating again after going through the menopause – all links to reproduction effects. Women are passing blood clots and the lining of their uterus while men report erectile dysfunction and blood effects. Most

significantly of all *un*vaccinated women began to report similar menstrual changes after interaction with *'vaccinated'* people and men and children were also affected with bleeding noses, blood clots and other conditions. 'Shedding' is when vaccinated people can emit the content of a vaccine to affect the unvaccinated, but this is different. 'Vaccinated' people were not shedding a 'live virus' allegedly in 'vaccines' as before because the fake 'Covid vaccines' involve synthetic material and other toxicity. Doctors exposing what is happening prefer the term 'transmission' to shedding. Somehow those that have had the shots are transmitting effects to those that haven't. Dr Carrie Madej said the nano-content of the 'vaccines' can 'act like an antenna' to others around them which fits perfectly with my own conclusions. This 'vaccine' transmission phenomenon was becoming known as the book went into production and I deal with this further in the Postscript.

Vaccine effects on sterility are well known. The World Health Organization was accused in 2014 of sterilising millions of women in Kenya with the evidence confirmed by the content of the vaccines involved. The same WHO behind the 'Covid' hoax admitted its involvement for more than ten years with the vaccine programme. Other countries made similar claims. Charges were lodged by Tanzania, Nicaragua, Mexico, and the Philippines. The Gardasil vaccine claimed to protect against a genital 'virus' known as HPV has also been linked to infertility. Big Pharma and the WHO (same thing) are criminal and satanic entities. Then there's the Bill Gates Foundation which is connected through funding and shared interests with 20 pharmaceutical giants and laboratories. He stands accused of directing the policy of United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), vaccine alliance GAVI, and other groupings, to advance the vaccine agenda and silence opposition at great cost to women and children. At the same time Gates wants to reduce the global population. Coincidence?

Great Reset = Smart Grid = new human

The Cult agenda I have been exposing for 30 years is now being openly promoted by Cult assets like Gates and Klaus Schwab of the World Economic Forum under code-terms like the 'Great Reset', 'Build Back Better' and 'a rare but narrow window of opportunity to reflect, reimagine, and reset our world'. What provided this 'rare but narrow window of opportunity'? The 'Covid' hoax did. Who created that? *They* did. My books from not that long ago warned about the planned 'Internet of Things' (IoT) and its implications for human freedom. This was the plan to connect all technology to the Internet and artificial intelligence and today we are way down that road with an estimated 36 billion devices connected to the World Wide Web and that figure is projected to be 76 billion by 2025. I further warned that the Cult planned to go beyond that to the Internet of *Everything* when the human brain was connected via AI to the Internet and Kurzweil's 'cloud'. Now we have Cult operatives like Schwab calling for precisely that under the term 'Internet of Bodies', a fusion of the physical, digital and biological into one centrally-controlled Smart Grid system which the Cult refers to as the 'Fourth Industrial Revolution'. They talk about the 'biological', but they really mean the synthetic-biological which is required to fully integrate the human body and brain into the Smart Grid and artificial intelligence planned to replace the human mind. We have everything being synthetically manipulated including the natural world through GMO and smart dust, the food we eat and the human body itself with synthetic 'vaccines'. I said in *The Answer* that we would see the Cult push for synthetic meat to replace animals and in February, 2021, the so predictable psychopath Bill Gates called for the introduction of synthetic meat to save us all from 'climate change'. The climate hoax just keeps on giving like the 'Covid' hoax. The war on meat by vegan activists is a carbon (oops, sorry) copy of the manipulation of transgender activists. They have no idea (except their inner core) that they are being used to promote and impose the agenda of the Cult or that they are only the *vehicle* and not the *reason*. This is not to say those who choose not to eat meat shouldn't be respected and supported in that right, but there are ulterior motives

for those in power. A *Forbes* article in December, 2019, highlighted the plan so beloved of Schwab and the Cult under the heading: 'What Is The Internet of Bodies? And How Is It Changing Our World?' The article said the human body is the latest data platform (remember 'our vaccine is an operating system'). *Forbes* described the plan very accurately and the words could have come straight out of my books from long before:

The Internet of Bodies (IoB) is an extension of the IoT and basically connects the human body to a network through devices that are ingested, implanted, or connected to the body in some way. Once connected, data can be exchanged, and the body and device can be remotely monitored and controlled.

They were really describing a human hive mind with human perception centrally-dictated via an AI connection as well as allowing people to be 'remotely monitored and controlled'. Everything from a fridge to a human mind could be directed from a central point by these insane psychopaths and 'Covid vaccines' are crucial to this. Forbes explained the process I mentioned earlier of holdable and wearable technology followed by implantable. The article said there were three generations of the Internet of Bodies that include:

- Body external: These are wearable devices such as Apple Watches or Fitbits that can monitor our health.

- Body internal: These include pacemakers, cochlear implants, and digital pills that go inside our bodies to monitor or control various aspects of health.

- Body embedded: The third generation of the Internet of Bodies is embedded technology where technology and the human body are melded together and have a real-time connection to a remote machine.

Forbes noted the development of the Brain Computer Interface (BCI) which merges the brain with an external device for monitoring and controlling in real-time. 'The ultimate goal is to help restore function to individuals with disabilities by using brain signals rather than conventional neuromuscular pathways.' Oh, do fuck off. The goal of brain interface technology is controlling human thought and emotion from the central point in a hive mind serving its masters wishes. Many people are now agreeing to be chipped to open doors without a key. You can recognise them because they'll be wearing a mask, social distancing and lining up for the 'vaccine'. The Cult plans a Great Reset money system after they have completed the demolition of the global economy in which 'money' will be exchanged through communication with body operating systems. Rand Corporation, a Cult-owned think tank, said of the Internet of Bodies or IoB:

> Internet of Bodies technologies fall under the broader IoT umbrella. But as the name suggests, IoB devices introduce an even more intimate interplay between humans and gadgets. IoB devices monitor the human body, collect health metrics and other personal information, and transmit those data over the Internet. Many devices, such as fitness trackers, are already in use … IoB devices … and those in development can track, record, and store users' whereabouts, bodily functions, and what they see, hear, and even think.

Schwab's World Economic Forum, a long-winded way of saying 'fascism' or 'the Cult', has gone full-on with the Internet of Bodies in the 'Covid' era. 'We're entering the era of the Internet of Bodies', it declared, 'collecting our physical data via a range of devices that can be implanted, swallowed or worn'. The result would be a huge amount of health-related data that could improve human wellbeing around the world, and prove crucial in fighting the 'Covid-19 pandemic'. Does anyone think these clowns care about 'human wellbeing' after the death and devastation their pandemic hoax has purposely caused? Schwab and co say we should move forward with the Internet of Bodies because 'Keeping track of symptoms could help us stop the spread of infection, and quickly detect new cases'. How wonderful, but keeping track' is all they are really bothered

about. Researchers were investigating if data gathered from smartwatches and similar devices could be used as viral infection alerts by tracking the user's heart rate and breathing. Schwab said in his 2018 book *Shaping the Future of the Fourth Industrial Revolution*:

> The lines between technologies and beings are becoming blurred and not just by the ability to create lifelike robots or synthetics. Instead it is about the ability of new technologies to literally become part of us. Technologies already influence how we understand ourselves, how we think about each other, and how we determine our realities. As the technologies … give us deeper access to parts of ourselves, we may begin to integrate digital technologies into our bodies.

You can see what the game is. Twenty-four hour control and people – if you could still call them that – would never know when something would go ping and take them out of circulation. It's the most obvious rush to a global fascist dictatorship and the complete submission of humanity and yet still so many are locked away in their Cult-induced perceptual coma and can't see it.

Smart Grid control centres

The human body is being transformed by the 'vaccines' and in other ways into a synthetic cyborg that can be attached to the global Smart Grid which would be controlled from a central point and other sub-locations of Grid manipulation. Where are these planned to be? Well, China for a start which is one of the Cult's biggest centres of operation. The technological control system and technocratic rule was incubated here to be unleashed across the world after the 'Covid' hoax came out of China in 2020. Another Smart Grid location that will surprise people new to this is Israel. I have exposed in *The Trigger* how Sabbatian technocrats, intelligence and military operatives were behind the horrors of 9/11 and not '19 Arab hijackers' who somehow manifested the ability to pilot big passenger airliners when instructors at puddle-jumping flying schools described some of them as a joke. The 9/11 attacks were made possible through control of civilian and military air computer systems and those of the White House, Pentagon and connected agencies. See *The Trigger* – it

will blow your mind. The controlling and coordinating force were the Sabbatian networks in Israel and the United States which by then had infiltrated the entire US government, military and intelligence system. The real name of the American Deep State is 'Sabbatian State'. Israel is a tiny country of only nine million people, but it is one of the global centres of cyber operations and fast catching Silicon Valley in importance to the Cult. Israel is known as the 'start-up nation' for all the cyber companies spawned there with the Sabbatian specialisation of 'cyber security' that I mentioned earlier which gives those companies access to computer systems of their clients in real time through 'backdoors' written into the coding when security software is downloaded. The Sabbatian centre of cyber operations outside Silicon Valley is the Israeli military Cyber Intelligence Unit, the biggest infrastructure project in Israel's history, headquartered in the desert-city of Beersheba and involving some 20,000 'cyber soldiers'. Here are located a literal army of Internet trolls scanning social media, forums and comment lists for anyone challenging the Cult agenda. The UK military has something similar with its 77th Brigade and associated operations. The Beersheba complex includes research and development centres for other Cult operations such as Intel, Microsoft, IBM, Google, Apple, Hewlett-Packard, Cisco Systems, Facebook and Motorola. Techcrunch.com ran an article about the Beersheba global Internet technology centre headlined 'Israel's desert city of Beersheba is turning into a cybertech oasis':

> The military's massive relocation of its prestigious technology units, the presence of multinational and local companies, a close proximity to Ben Gurion University and generous government subsidies are turning Beersheba into a major global cybertech hub. Beersheba has all of the ingredients of a vibrant security technology ecosystem, including Ben Gurion University with its graduate program in cybersecurity and Cyber Security Research Center, and the presence of companies such as EMC, Deutsche Telekom, PayPal, Oracle, IBM, and Lockheed Martin. It's also the future home of the INCB (Israeli National Cyber Bureau); offers a special income tax incentive for cyber security companies, and was the site for the relocation of the army's intelligence corps units.

Sabbatians have taken over the cyber world through the following process: They scan the schools for likely cyber talent and develop them at Ben Gurion University and their period of conscription in the Israeli Defense Forces when they are stationed at the Beersheba complex. When the cyber talented officially leave the army they are funded to start cyber companies with technology developed by themselves or given to them by the state. Much of this is stolen through backdoors of computer systems around the world with America top of the list. Others are sent off to Silicon Valley to start companies or join the major ones and so we have many major positions filled by apparently 'Jewish' but really Sabbatian operatives. Google, YouTube and Facebook are all run by 'Jewish' CEOs while Twitter is all but run by ultra-Zionist hedge-fund shark Paul Singer. At the centre of the Sabbatian global cyber web is the Israeli army's Unit 8200 which specialises in hacking into computer systems of other countries, inserting viruses, gathering information, instigating malfunction, and even taking control of them from a distance. A long list of Sabbatians involved with 9/11, Silicon Valley and Israeli cyber security companies are operatives of Unit 8200. This is not about Israel. It's about the Cult. Israel is planned to be a Smart Grid hub as with China and what is happening at Beersheba is not for the benefit of Jewish people who are treated disgustingly by the Sabbatian elite that control the country. A glance at the Nuremberg Codes will tell you that.

The story is much bigger than 'Covid', important as that is to where we are being taken. Now, though, it's time to really strap in. There's more … much more …

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Who controls the Cult?

Awake, arise or be forever fall'n
John Milton, *Paradise Lost*

I have exposed this far the level of the Cult conspiracy that operates in the world of the seen and within the global secret society and satanic network which operates in the shadows one step back from the seen. The story, however, goes much deeper than that.

The 'Covid' hoax is major part of the Cult agenda, but only part, and to grasp the biggest picture we have to expand our attention beyond the realm of human sight and into the infinity of possibility that we cannot see. It is from here, ultimately, that humanity is being manipulated into a state of total control by the force which dictates the actions of the Cult. How much of reality can we see? Next to damn all is the answer. We may appear to see all there is to see in the 'space' our eyes survey and observe, but little could be further from the truth. The human 'world' is only a tiny band of frequency that the body's visual and perceptual systems can decode into *perception* of a 'world'. According to mainstream science the electromagnetic spectrum is 0.005 percent of what exists in the Universe (Fig 10). The maximum estimate I have seen is 0.5 percent and either way it's miniscule. I say it is far, far, smaller even than 0.005 percent when you compare reality we see with the totality of reality that we don't. Now get this if you are new to such information: Visible light, the only band of frequency that we can see, is a *fraction* of the 0.005

percent (Fig 11 overleaf). Take this further and realise that our universe is one of infinite universes and that universes are only a fragment of overall reality – *infinite* reality. Then compare that with the almost infinitesimal frequency band of visible light or human sight. You see that humans are as near blind as it is possible to be without actually being so. Artist and filmmaker, Sergio Toporek, said:

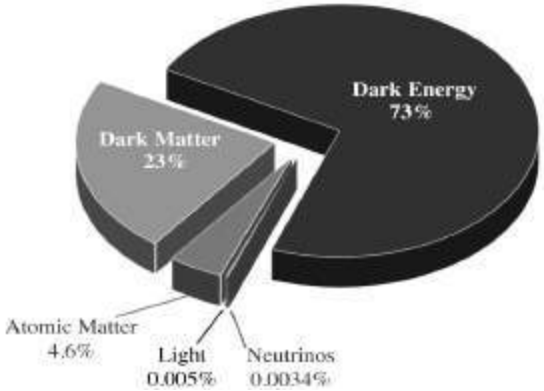

Figure 10: Humans can perceive such a tiny band of visual reality it's laughable.

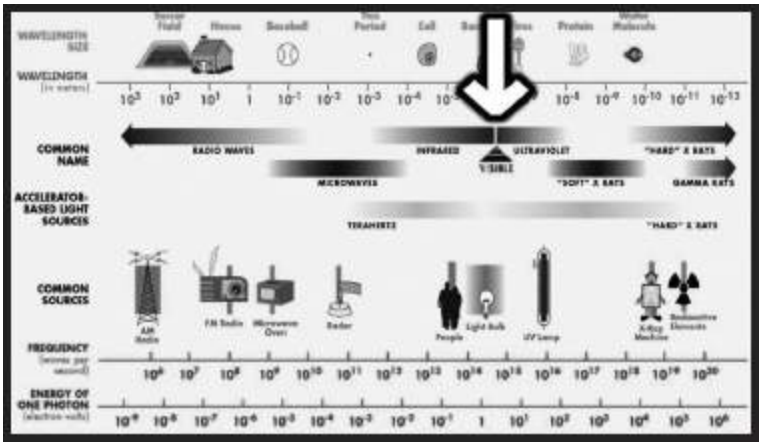

Figure 11: We can see a smear of the 0.005 percent electromagnetic spectrum, but we still know it all. Yep, makes sense.

Consider that you can see less than 1% of the electromagnetic spectrum and hear less than 1% of the acoustic spectrum. 90% of the cells in your body carry their own microbial DNA and are not 'you'. The atoms in your body are 99.9999999999999999% empty space and none of them are the ones you were born with ... Human beings have 46 chromosomes, two less than a potato.

The existence of the rainbow depends on the conical photoreceptors in your eyes; to animals without cones, the rainbow does not exist. So you don't just look at a rainbow, you create it. This is pretty amazing, especially considering that all the beautiful colours you see represent less than 1% of the electromagnetic spectrum.

Suddenly the 'world' of humans looks a very different place. Take into account, too, that Planet Earth when compared with the projected size of this single universe is the equivalent of a billionth of a pinhead. Imagine the ratio that would be when compared to infinite reality. To think that Christianity once insisted that Earth and humanity were the centre of everything. This background is vital if we are going to appreciate the nature of 'human' and how we can be manipulated by an unseen force. To human visual reality virtually *everything* is unseen and yet the prevailing perception within the institutions and so much of the public is that if we can't see it, touch it, hear it, taste it and smell it then it cannot exist. Such perception is indoctrinated and encouraged by the Cult and its agents because it isolates believers in the strictly limited, village-idiot, realm of the five senses where perceptions can be firewalled and information controlled. Most of those perpetuating the 'this-world-is-all-there-is' insanity are themselves indoctrinated into believing the same delusion. While major players and influencers know that official reality is laughable most of those in science, academia and medicine really believe the nonsense they peddle and teach succeeding generations. Those who challenge the orthodoxy are dismissed as nutters and freaks to protect the manufactured illusion from exposure. Observe the dynamic of the 'Covid' hoax and you will see how that takes the same form. The inner-circle psychopaths knows it's a gigantic scam, but almost the entirety of those imposing their fascist rules believe that 'Covid' is all that they're told it is.

Stolen identity

Ask people who they are and they will give you their name, place of birth, location, job, family background and life story. Yet that is not who they are – it is what they are *experiencing*. The difference is *absolutely crucial*. The true 'I', the eternal, infinite 'I', is consciousness,

a state of being aware. Forget 'form'. That is a vehicle for a brief experience. Consciousness does not come *from* the brain, but *through* the brain and even that is more symbolic than literal. We are awareness, pure awareness, and this is what withdraws from the body at what we call 'death' to continue our eternal beingness, *isness*, in other realms of reality within the limitlessness of infinity or the Biblical 'many mansions in my father's house'. Labels of a human life, man, woman, transgender, black, white, brown, nationality, circumstances and income are not who we are. They are what we are – awareness – is *experiencing* in a brief connection with a band of frequency we call 'human'. The labels are not the self; they are, to use the title of one of my books, a *Phantom* Self. I am not David Icke born in Leicester, England, on April 29th, 1952. I am the consciousness *having that experience*. The Cult and its non-human masters seek to convince us through the institutions of 'education', science, medicine, media and government that what we are *experiencing* is who we *are*. It's so easy to control and direct perception locked away in the bewildered illusions of the five senses with no expanded radar. Try, by contrast, doing the same with a humanity aware of its true self and its true power to consciously create its reality and experience. How is it possible to do this? We do it all day every day. If you perceive yourself as 'little me' with no power to impact upon your life and the world then your life experience will reflect that. You will hand the power you don't think you have to authority in all its forms which will use it to control your experience. This, in turn, will appear to confirm your perception of 'little me' in a self-fulfilling feedback loop. But that is what 'little me' really is – a *perception*. We are all 'big-me', infinite me, and the Cult has to make us forget that if its will is to prevail. We are therefore manipulated and pressured into self-identifying with human labels and not the consciousness/awareness *experiencing* those human labels.

The phenomenon of identity politics is a Cult-instigated manipulation technique to sub-divide previous labels into even smaller ones. A United States university employs this list of letters to

describe student identity: LGBTTQQFAGPBDSM or lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, transsexual, queer, questioning, flexual, asexual, gender-fuck, polyamorous, bondage/discipline, dominance/submission and sadism/masochism. I'm sure other lists are even longer by now as people feel the need to self-identity the 'I' with the minutiae of race and sexual preference. Wokers programmed by the Cult for generations believe this is about 'inclusivity' when it's really the Cult locking them away into smaller and smaller versions of Phantom Self while firewalling them from the influence of their true self, the infinite, eternal 'I'. You may notice that my philosophy which contends that we are all unique points of attention/awareness within the same infinite whole or Oneness is the ultimate non-racism. The very sense of Oneness makes the judgement of people by their body-type, colour or sexuality utterly ridiculous and confirms that racism has no understanding of reality (including anti-white racism). Yet despite my perception of life Cult agents and fast-asleep Wokers label me racist to discredit my information while they are themselves phenomenally racist and sexist. All they see is race and sexuality and they judge people as good or bad, demons or untouchables, by their race and sexuality. All they see is *Phantom Self* and perceive themselves in terms of Phantom Self. They are pawns and puppets of the Cult agenda to focus attention and self-identity in the five senses and play those identities against each other to divide and rule. Columbia University has introduced segregated graduations in another version of social distancing designed to drive people apart and teach them that different racial and cultural groups have nothing in common with each other. The last thing the Cult wants is unity. Again the pump-primers of this will be Cult operatives in the knowledge of what they are doing, but the rest are just the Phantom Self blind leading the Phantom Self blind. We *do* have something in common – we are all *the same consciousness* having different temporary experiences.

What is this 'human'?

Yes, what *is* 'human'? That is what we are supposed to be, right? I mean 'human'? True, but 'human' is the experience not the 'I'. Break it down to basics and 'human' is the way that information is processed. If we are to experience and interact with this band of frequency we call the 'world' we must have a vehicle that operates within that band of frequency. Our consciousness in its prime form cannot do that; it is way beyond the frequency of the human realm. My consciousness or awareness could not tap these keys and pick up the cup in front of me in the same way that radio station A cannot interact with radio station B when they are on different frequencies. The human body is the means through which we have that interaction. I have long described the body as a biological computer which processes information in a way that allows consciousness to experience this reality. The body is a receiver, transmitter and processor of information in a particular way that we call human. We visually perceive only the world of the five senses in a wakened state – that is the limit of the body's visual decoding system. In truth it's not even visual in the way we experience 'visual reality' as I will come to in a moment. We are 'human' because the body processes the information sources of human into a reality and behaviour system that we *perceive* as human. Why does an elephant act like an elephant and not like a human or a duck? The elephant's biological computer is a different information field and processes information according to that program into a visual and behaviour type we call an elephant. The same applies to everything in our reality. These body information fields are perpetuated through procreation (like making a copy of a software program). The Cult wants to break that cycle and intervene technologically to transform the human information field into one that will change what we call humanity. If it can change the human information field it will change the way that field processes information and change humanity both 'physically' and psychologically. Hence the *messenger* (information) RNA 'vaccines' and so much more that is targeting human genetics by changing the body's information – *messaging* – construct through food, drink, radiation, toxicity and other means.

Reality that we experience is nothing like reality as it really is in the same way that the reality people experience in virtual reality games is not the reality they are really living in. The game is only a decoded source of information that appears to be a reality. Our world is also an information construct – a *simulation* (more later). In its base form our reality is a wavefield of information much the same in theme as Wi-Fi. The five senses decode wavefield information into electrical information which they communicate to the brain to decode into holographic (illusory 'physical') information. Different parts of the brain specialise in decoding different senses and the information is fused into a reality that appears to be outside of us but is really inside the brain and the genetic structure in general (Fig 12 overleaf). DNA is a receiver-transmitter of information and a vital part of this decoding process and the body's connection to other realities. Change DNA and you change the way we decode and connect with reality – see 'Covid vaccines'. Think of computers decoding Wi-Fi. You have information encoded in a radiation field and the computer decodes that information into a very different form on the screen. You can't see the Wi-Fi until its information is made manifest on the screen and the information on the screen is inside the computer and not outside. I have just described how we decode the 'human world'. All five senses decode the waveform 'Wi-Fi' field into electrical signals and the brain (computer) constructs reality inside the brain and not outside – 'You don't just look at a rainbow, you create it'. Sound is a simple example. We don't hear sound until the brain decodes it. Waveform sound waves are picked up by the hearing sense and communicated to the brain in an electrical form to be decoded into the sounds that we hear. Everything we hear is inside the brain along with everything we see, feel, smell and taste. Words and language are waveform fields generated by our vocal chords which pass through this process until they are decoded by the brain into words that we hear. Different languages are different frequency fields or sound waves generated by vocal chords. Late British philosopher Alan Watts said:

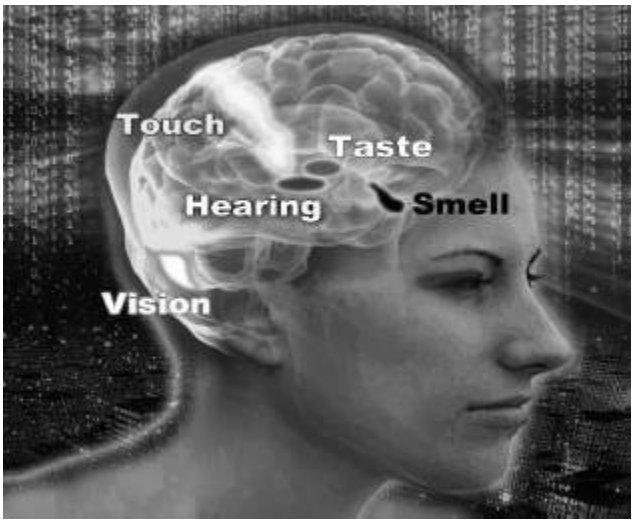

Figure 12: The brain receives information from the five senses and constructs from that our perceived reality.

[Without the brain] the world is devoid of light, heat, weight, solidity, motion, space, time or any other imaginable feature. All these phenomena are interactions, or transactions, of vibrations with a certain arrangement of neurons.

That's exactly what they are and scientist Robert Lanza describes in his book, *Biocentrism*, how we decode electromagnetic waves and energy into visual and 'physical' experience. He uses the example of a flame emitting photons, electromagnetic energy, each pulsing electrically and magnetically:

… these … invisible electromagnetic waves strike a human retina, and if (and only if) the waves happen to measure between 400 and 700 nano meters in length from crest to crest, then their energy is just right to deliver a stimulus to the 8 million cone-shaped cells in the retina.

Each in turn send an electrical pulse to a neighbour neuron, and on up the line this goes, at 250 mph, until it reaches the … occipital lobe of the brain, in the back of the head. There, a cascading complex of neurons fire from the incoming stimuli, and we subjectively perceive this experience as a yellow brightness occurring in a place we have been conditioned to call the 'external world'.

You hear what you decode

If a tree falls or a building collapses they make no noise unless someone is there to decode the energetic waves generated by the disturbance into what we call sound. Does a falling tree make a noise? Only if you hear it – *decode* it. Everything in our reality is a frequency field of information operating within the overall 'Wi-Fi' field that I call The Field. A vibrational disturbance is generated in The Field by the fields of the falling tree or building. These disturbance waves are what we decode into the sound of them falling. If no one is there to do that then neither will make any noise. Reality is created by the observer – *decoder* – and the *perceptions* of the observer affect the decoding process. For this reason different people – different *perceptions* – will perceive the same reality or situation in a different way. What one may perceive as a nightmare another will see as an opportunity. The question of why the Cult is so focused on controlling human perception now answers itself. All experienced reality is the act of decoding and we don't experience Wi-Fi until it is decoded on the computer screen. The sight and sound of an Internet video is encoded in the Wi-Fi all around us, but we don't see or hear it until the computer decodes that information. Taste, smell and touch are all phenomena of the brain as a result of the same process. We don't taste, smell or feel anything except in the brain and there are pain relief techniques that seek to block the signal from the site of discomfort to the brain because if the brain doesn't decode that signal we don't feel pain. Pain is in the brain and only appears to be at the point of impact thanks to the feedback loop between them. We don't see anything until electrical information from the sight senses is decoded in an area at the back of the brain. If that area is damaged we can go blind when our eyes are perfectly okay. So why do we go blind if we damage an eye? We damage the information processing between the waveform visual information and the visual decoding area of the brain. If information doesn't reach the brain in a form it can decode then we can't see the visual reality that it represents. What's more the brain is decoding only a fraction of the information it receives and the rest is absorbed by the

sub-conscious mind. This explanation is from the science magazine, *Wonderpedia*:

> Every second, 11 million sensations crackle along these [brain] pathways ... The brain is confronted with an alarming array of images, sounds and smells which it rigorously filters down until it is left with a manageable list of around 40. Thus 40 sensations per second make up what we perceive as reality.

The 'world' is not what people are told to believe that is it and the inner circles of the Cult *know that*.

Illusory 'physical' reality

We can only see a smear of 0.005 percent of the Universe which is only one of a vast array of universes – 'mansions' – within infinite reality. Even then the brain decodes only 40 pieces of information ('sensations') from a potential *11 million* that we receive every second. Two points strike you from this immediately: The sheer breathtaking stupidity of believing we know anything so rigidly that there's nothing more to know; and the potential for these processes to be manipulated by a malevolent force to control the reality of the population. One thing I can say for sure with no risk of contradiction is that when you can perceive an almost indescribable fraction of infinite reality there is always more to know as in tidal waves of it. Ancient Greek philosopher Socrates was so right when he said that wisdom is to know how little we know. How obviously true that is when you think that we are experiencing a physical world of solidity that is neither physical nor solid and a world of apartness when everything is connected. Cult-controlled 'science' dismisses the so-called 'paranormal' and all phenomena related to that when the 'para'-normal is perfectly normal and explains the alleged 'great mysteries' which dumbfound scientific minds. There is a reason for this. A 'scientific mind' in terms of the mainstream is a material mind, a five-sense mind imprisoned in see it, touch it, hear it, smell it and taste it. Phenomena and happenings that can't be explained that way leave the 'scientific mind' bewildered and the rule is that if they

can't account for why something is happening then it can't, by definition, be happening. I beg to differ. Telepathy is thought waves passing through The Field (think wave disturbance again) to be decoded by someone able to connect with that wavelength (information). For example: You can pick up the thought waves of a friend at any distance and at the very least that will bring them to mind. A few minutes later the friend calls you. 'My god', you say, 'that's incredible – I was just thinking of you.' Ah, but *they* were thinking of *you* before they made the call and that's what you decoded. Native peoples not entrapped in five-sense reality do this so well it became known as the 'bush telegraph'. Those known as psychics and mediums (genuine ones) are doing the same only across dimensions of reality. 'Mind over matter' comes from the fact that matter and mind are the *same*. The state of one influences the state of the other. Indeed one *and* the other are illusions. They are aspects of the same field. Paranormal phenomena are all explainable so why are they still considered 'mysteries' or not happening? Once you go down this road of understanding you begin to expand awareness beyond the five senses and that's the nightmare for the Cult.

Figure 13: Holograms are not solid, but the best ones appear to be.

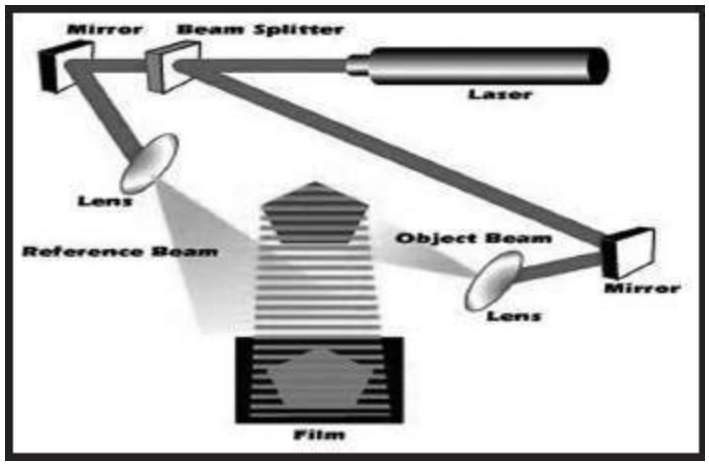

Figure 14: How holograms are created by capturing a waveform version of the subject image.

Holographic 'solidity'

Our reality is not solid, it is holographic. We are now well aware of holograms which are widely used today. Two-dimensional information is decoded into a three-dimensional reality that is not solid although can very much appear to be (Fig 13). Holograms are created with a laser divided into two parts. One goes directly onto a holographic photographic print ('reference beam') and the other takes a waveform image of the subject ('working beam') before being directed onto the print where it 'collides' with the other half of the laser (Fig 14). This creates a *waveform* interference pattern which contains the wavefield information of whatever is being photographed (Fig 15 overleaf). The process can be likened to dropping pebbles in a pond. Waves generated by each one spread out across the water to collide with the others and create a wave representation of where the stones fell and at what speed, weight and distance. A waveform interference pattern of a hologram is akin to the waveform information in The Field which the five senses decode into electrical signals to be decoded by the brain into a holographic illusory 'physical' reality. In the same way when a laser (think human attention) is directed at the waveform interference pattern a three-dimensional version of the subject is projected into apparently 'solid' reality (Fig 16). An amazing trait of holograms reveals more 'paranormal mysteries'. Information of the *whole*

hologram is encoded in waveform in every part of the interference pattern by the way they are created. This means that every *part* of a hologram is a smaller version of the whole. Cut the interference wave-pattern into four and you won't get four parts of the image. You get quarter-sized versions of the *whole* image. The body is a hologram and the same applies. Here we have the basis of acupuncture, reflexology and other forms of healing which identify representations of the whole body in all of the parts, hands, feet, ears, everywhere. Skilled palm readers can do what they do because the information of whole body is encoded in the hand. The concept of as above, so below, comes from this.

Figure 15: A waveform interference pattern that holds the information that transforms into a hologram.

Figure 16: Holographic people including 'Elvis' holographically inserted to sing a duet with Celine Dion.

The question will be asked of why, if solidity is illusory, we can't just walk through walls and each other. The resistance is not solid against solid; it is electromagnetic field against electromagnetic field and we decode this into the *experience* of solid against solid. We should also not underestimate the power of belief to dictate reality. What you believe is impossible *will be*. Your belief impacts on your decoding processes and they won't decode what you think is impossible. What we believe we perceive and what we perceive we experience. 'Can't dos' and 'impossibles' are like a firewall in a computer system that won't put on the screen what the firewall blocks. How vital that is to understanding how human experience has been hijacked. I explain in *The Answer*, *Everything You Need To Know But Have Never Been Told* and other books a long list of 'mysteries' and 'paranormal' phenomena that are not mysterious and perfectly normal once you realise what reality is and how it works. 'Ghosts' can be seen to pass through 'solid' walls because the walls are not solid and the ghost is a discarnate entity operating on a frequency so different to that of the wall that it's like two radio stations sharing the same space while never interfering with each other. I have seen ghosts do this myself. The apartness of people and objects is also an illusion. Everything is connected by the Field like all sea life is connected by the sea. It's just that within the limits of our visual reality we only 'see' holographic information and not the field of information that connects everything and from which the holographic world is made manifest. If you can only see holographic 'objects' and not the field that connects them they will appear to you as unconnected to each other in the same way that we see the computer while not seeing the Wi-Fi.

What you don't know *can* hurt you

Okay, we return to those 'two worlds' of human society and the Cult with its global network of interconnecting secret societies and satanic groups which manipulate through governments, corporations, media, religions, etc. The fundamental difference between them is *knowledge*. The idea has been to keep humanity

ignorant of the plan for its total enslavement underpinned by a crucial ignorance of reality – who we are and where we are – and how we interact with it. 'Human' should be the interaction between our expanded eternal consciousness and the five-sense body experience. We are meant to be *in* this world in terms of the five senses but not *of* this world in relation to our greater consciousness and perspective. In that state we experience the small picture of the five senses within the wider context of the big picture of awareness beyond the five senses. Put another way the five senses see the dots and expanded awareness connects them into pictures and patterns that give context to the apparently random and unconnected. Without the context of expanded awareness the five senses see only apartness and randomness with apparently no meaning. The Cult and its other-dimensional controllers seek to intervene in the frequency realm where five-sense reality is supposed to connect with expanded reality and to keep the two apart (more on this in the final chapter). When that happens five-sense mental and emotional processes are no longer influenced by expanded awareness, or the True 'I', and instead are driven by the isolated perceptions of the body's decoding systems. They are in the world *and* of it. Here we have the human plight and why humanity with its potential for infinite awareness can be so easily manipulatable and descend into such extremes of stupidity.

Once the Cult isolates five-sense mind from expanded awareness it can then program the mind with perceptions and beliefs by controlling information that the mind receives through the 'education' system of the formative years and the media perceptual bombardment and censorship of an entire lifetime. Limit perception and a sense of the possible through limiting knowledge by limiting and skewing information while censoring and discrediting that which could set people free. As the title of another of my books says *… And The Truth Shall Set You Free*. For this reason the last thing the Cult wants in circulation is the truth about anything – especially the reality of the eternal 'I' – and that's why it is desperate to control information. The Cult knows that information becomes perception

which becomes behaviour which, collectively, becomes human society. Cult-controlled and funded mainstream 'science' denies the existence of an eternal 'I' and seeks to dismiss and trash all evidence to the contrary. Cult-controlled mainstream religion has a version of 'God' that is little more than a system of control and dictatorship that employs threats of damnation in an afterlife to control perceptions and behaviour in the here and now through fear and guilt. Neither is true and it's the 'neither' that the Cult wishes to suppress. This 'neither' is that everything is an expression, a point of attention, within an infinite state of consciousness which is the real meaning of the term 'God'.

Perceptual obsession with the 'physical body' and five-senses means that 'God' becomes personified as a bearded bloke sitting among the clouds or a raging bully who loves us if we do what 'he' wants and condemns us to the fires of hell if we don't. These are no more than a 'spiritual' fairy tales to control and dictate events and behaviour through fear of this 'God' which has bizarrely made 'God-fearing' in religious circles a state to be desired. I would suggest that fearing *anything* is not to be encouraged and celebrated, but rather deleted. You can see why 'God fearing' is so beneficial to the Cult and its religions when *they* decide what 'God' wants and what 'God' demands (the Cult demands) that everyone do. As the great American comedian Bill Hicks said satirising a Christian zealot: 'I think what God meant to say.' How much of this infinite awareness ('God') that we access is decided by how far we choose to expand our perceptions, self-identity and sense of the possible. The scale of self-identity reflects itself in the scale of awareness that we can connect with and are influenced by – how much knowing and insight we have instead of programmed perception. You cannot expand your awareness into the infinity of possibility when you believe that you are little me Peter the postman or Mary in marketing and nothing more. I'll deal with this in the concluding chapter because it's crucial to how we turnaround current events.

Where the Cult came from

When I realised in the early 1990s there was a Cult network behind global events I asked the obvious question: When did it start? I took it back to ancient Rome and Egypt and on to Babylon and Sumer in Mesopotamia, the 'Land Between Two Rivers', in what we now call Iraq. The two rivers are the Tigris and Euphrates and this region is of immense historical and other importance to the Cult, as is the land called Israel only 550 miles away by air. There is much more going with deep esoteric meaning across this whole region. It's not only about 'wars for oil'. Priceless artefacts from Mesopotamia were stolen or destroyed after the American and British invasion of Iraq in 2003 justified by the lies of Boy Bush and Tony Blair (their Cult masters) about non-existent 'weapons of mass destruction'. Mesopotamia was the location of Sumer (about 5,400BC to 1,750BC), and Babylon (about 2,350BC to 539BC). Sabbatians may have become immensely influential in the Cult in modern times but they are part of a network that goes back into the mists of history. Sumer is said by historians to be the 'cradle of civilisation'. I disagree. I say it was the re-start of what we call human civilisation after cataclysmic events symbolised in part as the 'Great Flood' destroyed the world that existed before. These fantastic upheavals that I have been describing in detail in the books since the early1990s appear in accounts and legends of ancient cultures across the world and they are supported by geological and biological evidence. Stone tablets found in Iraq detailing the Sumer period say the cataclysms were caused by non-human 'gods' they call the Anunnaki. These are described in terms of extraterrestrial visitations in which knowledge supplied by the Anunnaki is said to have been the source of at least one of the world's oldest writing systems and developments in astronomy, mathematics and architecture that were way ahead of their time. I have covered this subject at length in *The Biggest Secret* and *Children of the Matrix* and the same basic 'Anunnaki' story can be found in Zulu accounts in South Africa where the late and very great Zulu high shaman Credo Mutwa told me that the Sumerian Anunnaki were known by Zulus as the Chitauri or 'children of the serpent'. See my six-hour video interview with Credo on this subject entitled *The*

Reptilian Agenda recorded at his then home near Johannesburg in 1999 which you can watch on the Ickonic media platform.

The Cult emerged out of Sumer, Babylon and Egypt (and elsewhere) and established the Roman Empire before expanding with the Romans into northern Europe from where many empires were savagely imposed in the form of Cult-controlled societies all over the world. Mass death and destruction was their calling card. The Cult established its centre of operations in Europe and European Empires were Cult empires which allowed it to expand into a global force. Spanish and Portuguese colonialists headed for Central and South America while the British and French targeted North America. Africa was colonised by Britain, France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, Italy, and Germany. Some like Britain and France moved in on the Middle East. The British Empire was by far the biggest for a simple reason. By now Britain was the headquarters of the Cult from which it expanded to form Canada, the United States, Australia and New Zealand. The Sun never set on the British Empire such was the scale of its occupation. London remains a global centre for the Cult along with Rome and the Vatican although others have emerged in Israel and China. It is no accident that the 'virus' is alleged to have come out of China while Italy was chosen as the means to terrify the Western population into compliance with 'Covid' fascism. Nor that Israel has led the world in 'Covid' fascism and mass 'vaccination'.

You would think that I would mention the United States here, but while it has been an important means of imposing the Cult's will it is less significant than would appear and is currently in the process of having what power it does have deleted. The Cult in Europe has mostly loaded the guns for the US to fire. America has been controlled from Europe from the start through Cult operatives in Britain and Europe. The American Revolution was an illusion to make it appear that America was governing itself while very different forces were pulling the strings in the form of Cult families such as the Rothschilds through the Rockefellers and other subordinates. The Rockefellers are extremely close to Bill Gates and

established both scalpel and drug 'medicine' and the World Health Organization. They play a major role in the development and circulation of vaccines through the Rockefeller Foundation on which Bill Gates said his Foundation is based. Why wouldn't this be the case when the Rockefellers and Gates are on the same team? Cult infiltration of human society goes way back into what we call history and has been constantly expanding and centralising power with the goal of establishing a global structure to dictate everything. Look how this has been advanced in great leaps with the 'Covid' hoax.

The non-human dimension

I researched and observed the comings and goings of Cult operatives through the centuries and even thousands of years as they were born, worked to promote the agenda within the secret society and satanic networks, and then died for others to replace them. Clearly there had to be a coordinating force that spanned this entire period while operatives who would not have seen the end goal in their lifetimes came and went advancing the plan over millennia. I went in search of that coordinating force with the usual support from the extraordinary synchronicity of my life which has been an almost daily experience since 1990. I saw common themes in religious texts and ancient cultures about a non-human force manipulating human society from the hidden. Christianity calls this force Satan, the Devil and demons; Islam refers to the Jinn or Djinn; Zulus have their Chitauri (spelt in other ways in different parts of Africa); and the Gnostic people in Egypt in the period around and before 400AD referred to this phenomena as the 'Archons', a word meaning rulers in Greek. Central American cultures speak of the 'Predators' among other names and the same theme is everywhere. I will use 'Archons' as a collective name for all of them. When you see how their nature and behaviour is described all these different sources are clearly talking about the same force. Gnostics described the Archons in terms of 'luminous fire' while Islam relates the Jinn to 'smokeless fire'. Some refer to beings in form that could occasionally be seen, but the most common of common theme is that they operate from

unseen realms which means almost all existence to the visual processes of humans. I had concluded that this was indeed the foundation of human control and that the Cult was operating within the human frequency band on behalf of this hidden force when I came across the writings of Gnostics which supported my conclusions in the most extraordinary way.

A sealed earthen jar was found in 1945 near the town of Nag Hammadi about 75-80 miles north of Luxor on the banks of the River Nile in Egypt. Inside was a treasure trove of manuscripts and texts left by the Gnostic people some 1,600 years earlier. They included 13 leather-bound papyrus codices (manuscripts) and more than 50 texts written in Coptic Egyptian estimated to have been hidden in the jar in the period of 400AD although the source of the information goes back much further. Gnostics oversaw the Great or Royal Library of Alexandria, the fantastic depository of ancient texts detailing advanced knowledge and accounts of human history. The Library was dismantled and destroyed in stages over a long period with the death-blow delivered by the Cult-established Roman Church in the period around 415AD. The Church of Rome was the Church of Babylon relocated as I said earlier. Gnostics were not a race. They were a way of perceiving reality. Whenever they established themselves and their information circulated the terrorists of the Church of Rome would target them for destruction. This happened with the Great Library and with the Gnostic Cathars who were burned to death by the psychopaths after a long period of oppression at the siege of the Castle of Monségur in southern France in 1244. The Church has always been terrified of Gnostic information which demolishes the official Christian narrative although there is much in the Bible that supports the Gnostic view if you read it in another way. To anyone studying the texts of what became known as the Nag Hammadi Library it is clear that great swathes of Christian and Biblical belief has its origin with Gnostics sources going back to Sumer. Gnostic themes have been twisted to manipulate the perceived reality of Bible believers. Biblical texts have been in the open for centuries where they could be changed while Gnostic

documents found at Nag Hammadi were sealed away and untouched for 1,600 years. What you see is what they wrote.

Use your *pneuma* not your *nous*

Gnosticism and Gnostic come from 'gnosis' which means knowledge, or rather *secret* knowledge, in the sense of spiritual awareness – knowledge about reality and life itself. The desperation of the Cult's Church of Rome to destroy the Gnostics can be understood when the knowledge they were circulating was the last thing the Cult wanted the population to know. Sixteen hundred years later the same Cult is working hard to undermine and silence me for the same reason. The dynamic between knowledge and ignorance is a constant. 'Time' appears to move on, but essential themes remain the same. We are told to 'use your nous', a Gnostic word for head/brain/intelligence. They said, however, that spiritual awakening or 'salvation' could only be secured by expanding awareness *beyond* what they called *nous* and into *pneuma* or Infinite Self. Obviously as I read these texts the parallels with what I have been saying since 1990 were fascinating to me. There is a universal truth that spans human history and in that case why wouldn't we be talking the same language 16 centuries apart? When you free yourself from the perception program of the five senses and explore expanded realms of consciousness you are going to connect with the same information no matter what the perceived 'era' within a manufactured timeline of a single and tiny range of manipulated frequency. Humans working with 'smart' technology or knocking rocks together in caves is only a timeline appearing to operate within the human frequency band. Expanded awareness and the knowledge it holds have always been there whether the era be Stone Age or computer age. We can only access that knowledge by opening ourselves to its frequency which the five-sense prison cell is designed to stop us doing. Gates, Fauci, Whitty, Vallance, Zuckerberg, Brin, Page, Wojcicki, Bezos, and all the others behind the 'Covid' hoax clearly have a long wait before their range of frequency can make that connection given that an open heart is

crucial to that as we shall see. Instead of accessing knowledge directly through expanded awareness it is given to Cult operatives by the secret society networks of the Cult where it has been passed on over thousands of years outside the public arena. Expanded realms of consciousness is where great artists, composers and writers find their inspiration and where truth awaits anyone open enough to connect with it. We need to go there fast.

Archon hijack

A fifth of the Nag Hammadi texts describe the existence and manipulation of the Archons led by a 'Chief Archon' they call 'Yaldabaoth', or the 'Demiurge', and this is the Christian 'Devil', 'Satan', 'Lucifer', and his demons. Archons in Biblical symbolism are the 'fallen ones' which are also referred to as fallen angels after the angels expelled from heaven according to the Abrahamic religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. These angels are claimed to tempt humans to 'sin' ongoing and you will see how accurate that symbolism is during the rest of the book. The theme of 'original sin' is related to the 'Fall' when Adam and Eve were 'tempted by the serpent' and fell from a state of innocence and 'obedience' (connection) with God into a state of disobedience (disconnection). The Fall is said to have brought sin into the world and corrupted everything including human nature. Yaldabaoth, the 'Lord Archon', is described by Gnostics as a 'counterfeit spirit', 'The Blind One', 'The Blind God', and 'The Foolish One'. The Jewish name for Yaldabaoth in Talmudic writings is Samael which translates as 'Poison of God', or 'Blindness of God'. You see the parallels. Yaldabaoth in Islamic belief is the Muslim Jinn devil known as Shaytan – Shaytan is Satan as the same themes are found all over the world in every religion and culture. The 'Lord God' of the Old Testament is the 'Lord Archon' of Gnostic manuscripts and that's why he's such a bloodthirsty bastard. Satan is known by Christians as 'the Demon of Demons' and Gnostics called Yaldabaoth the 'Archon of Archons'. Both are known as 'The Deceiver'. We are talking about the same 'bloke' for sure and these common themes

using different names, storylines and symbolism tell a common tale of the human plight.

Archons are referred to in Nag Hammadi documents as mind parasites, inverters, guards, gatekeepers, detainers, judges, pitiless ones and deceivers. The 'Covid' hoax alone is a glaring example of all these things. The Biblical 'God' is so different in the Old and New Testaments because they are not describing the same phenomenon. The vindictive, angry, hate-filled, 'God' of the Old Testament, known as Yahweh, is Yaldabaoth who is depicted in Cult-dictated popular culture as the 'Dark Lord', 'Lord of Time', Lord (Darth) Vader and Dormammu, the evil ruler of the 'Dark Dimension' trying to take over the 'Earth Dimension' in the Marvel comic movie, *Dr Strange*. Yaldabaoth is both the Old Testament 'god' and the Biblical 'Satan'. Gnostics referred to Yaldabaoth as the 'Great Architect of the Universe'and the Cult-controlled Freemason network calls their god 'the 'Great Architect of the Universe' (also Grand Architect). The 'Great Architect' Yaldabaoth is symbolised by the Cult as the all-seeing eye at the top of the pyramid on the Great Seal of the United States and the dollar bill. Archon is encoded in *arch*-itect as it is in *arch*-angels and *arch*-bishops. All religions have the theme of a force for good and force for evil in some sort of spiritual war and there is a reason for that – the theme is true. The Cult and its non-human masters are quite happy for this to circulate. They present themselves as the force for good fighting evil when they are really the force of evil (absence of love). The whole foundation of Cult modus operandi is inversion. They promote themselves as a force for good and anyone challenging them in pursuit of peace, love, fairness, truth and justice is condemned as a satanic force for evil. This has been the game plan throughout history whether the Church of Rome inquisitions of non-believers or 'conspiracy theorists' and 'anti-vaxxers' of today. The technique is the same whatever the timeline era.

Yaldabaoth is revolting (true)

Yaldabaoth and the Archons are said to have revolted against God with Yaldabaoth claiming to *be* God – the *All That Is*. The Old Testament 'God' (Yaldabaoth) demanded to be worshipped as such: ' *I am* the LORD, and there is none else, there is no God beside me' (Isaiah 45:5). I have quoted in other books a man who said he was the unofficial son of the late Baron Philippe de Rothschild of the Mouton-Rothschild wine producing estates in France who died in 1988 and he told me about the Rothschild 'revolt from God'. The man said he was given the name Phillip Eugene de Rothschild and we shared long correspondence many years ago while he was living under another identity. He said that he was conceived through 'occult incest' which (within the Cult) was 'normal and to be admired'. 'Phillip' told me about his experience attending satanic rituals with rich and famous people whom he names and you can see them and the wider background to Cult Satanism in my other books starting with *The Biggest Secret*. Cult rituals are interactions with Archontic 'gods'. 'Phillip' described Baron Philippe de Rothschild as 'a master Satanist and hater of God' and he used the same term 'revolt from God' associated with Yaldabaoth/Satan/Lucifer/the Devil in describing the Sabbatian Rothschild dynasty. 'I played a key role in my family's revolt from God', he said. That role was to infiltrate in classic Sabbatian style the Christian Church, but eventually he escaped the mind-prison to live another life. The Cult has been targeting religion in a plan to make worship of the Archons the global one-world religion. Infiltration of Satanism into modern 'culture', especially among the young, through music videos, stage shows and other means, is all part of this.

Nag Hammadi texts describe Yaldabaoth and the Archons in their prime form as energy – consciousness – and say they can take form if they choose in the same way that consciousness takes form as a human. Yaldabaoth is called 'formless' and represents a deeply inverted, distorted and chaotic state of consciousness which seeks to attached to humans and turn them into a likeness of itself in an attempt at assimilation. For that to happen it has to manipulate

humans into low frequency mental and emotional states that match its own. Archons can certainly appear in human form and this is the origin of the psychopathic personality. The energetic distortion Gnostics called Yaldabaoth *is* psychopathy. When psychopathic Archons take human form that human will be a psychopath as an expression of Yaldabaoth consciousness. Cult psychopaths are Archons in human form. The principle is the same as that portrayed in the 2009 *Avatar* movie when the American military travelled to a fictional Earth-like moon called Pandora in the Alpha Centauri star system to infiltrate a society of blue people, or Na'vi, by hiding within bodies that looked like the Na'vi. Archons posing as humans have a particular hybrid information field, part human, part Archon, (the ancient 'demigods') which processes information in a way that manifests behaviour to match their psychopathic evil, lack of empathy and compassion, and stops them being influenced by the empathy, compassion and love that a fully-human information field is capable of expressing. Cult bloodlines interbreed, be they royalty or dark suits, for this reason and you have their obsession with incest. Interbreeding with full-blown humans would dilute the Archontic energy field that guarantees psychopathy in its representatives in the human realm.

Gnostic writings say the main non-human forms that Archons take are *serpentine* (what I have called for decades 'reptilian' amid unbounded ridicule from the Archontically-programmed) and what Gnostics describe as 'an unborn baby or foetus with grey skin and dark, unmoving eyes'. This is an excellent representation of the ET 'Greys' of UFO folklore which large numbers of people claim to have seen and been abducted by – Zulu shaman Credo Mutwa among them. I agree with those that believe in extraterrestrial or interdimensional visitations today and for thousands of years past. No wonder with their advanced knowledge and technological capability they were perceived and worshipped as gods for technological and other 'miracles' they appeared to perform. Imagine someone arriving in a culture disconnected from the modern world with a smartphone and computer. They would be

seen as a 'god' capable of 'miracles'. The Renegade Mind, however, wants to know the source of everything and not only the way that source manifests as human or non-human. In the same way that a Renegade Mind seeks the original source material for the 'Covid virus' to see if what is claimed is true. The original source of Archons in form is consciousness – the distorted state of consciousness known to Gnostics as Yaldabaoth.

'Revolt from God' is energetic disconnection

Where I am going next will make a lot of sense of religious texts and ancient legends relating to 'Satan', Lucifer' and the 'gods'. Gnostic descriptions sync perfectly with the themes of my own research over the years in how they describe a consciousness distortion seeking to impose itself on human consciousness. I've referred to the core of infinite awareness in previous books as Infinite Awareness in Awareness of Itself. By that I mean a level of awareness that knows that it is all awareness and is aware of all awareness. From here comes the frequency of love in its true sense and balance which is what love is on one level – the balance of all forces into a single whole called Oneness and Isness. The more we disconnect from this state of love that many call 'God' the constituent parts of that Oneness start to unravel and express themselves as a part and not a whole. They become individualised as intellect, mind, selfishness, hatred, envy, desire for power over others, and such like. This is not a problem in the greater scheme in that 'God', the *All That Is*, can experience all these possibilities through different expressions of itself including humans. What we as expressions of the whole experience the *All That Is* experiences. We are the *All That Is* experiencing itself. As we withdraw from that state of Oneness we disconnect from its influence and things can get very unpleasant and very stupid. Archontic consciousness is at the extreme end of that. It has so disconnected from the influence of Oneness that it has become an inversion of unity and love, an inversion of everything, an inversion of life itself. Evil is appropriately live written backwards. Archontic consciousness is obsessed with death, an inversion of life,

and so its manifestations in Satanism are obsessed with death. They use inverted symbols in their rituals such as the inverted pentagram and cross. Sabbatians as Archontic consciousness incarnate invert Judaism and every other religion and culture they infiltrate. They seek disunity and chaos and they fear unity and harmony as they fear love like garlic to a vampire. As a result the Cult, Archons incarnate, act with such evil, psychopathy and lack of empathy and compassion disconnected as they are from the source of love. How could Bill Gates and the rest of the Archontic psychopaths do what they have to human society in the 'Covid' era with all the death, suffering and destruction involved and have no emotional consequence for the impact on others? Now you know. Why have Zuckerberg, Brin, Page, Wojcicki and company callously censored information warning about the dangers of the 'vaccine' while thousands have been dying and having severe, sometimes life-changing reactions? Now you know. Why have Tedros, Fauci, Whitty, Vallance and their like around the world been using case and death figures they're aware are fraudulent to justify lockdowns and all the deaths and destroyed lives that have come from that? Now you know. Why did Christian Drosten produce and promote a 'testing' protocol that he knew couldn't test for infectious disease which led to a global human catastrophe. Now you know. The Archontic mind doesn't give a shit (Fig 17). I personally think that Gates and major Cult insiders are a form of AI cyborg that the Archons want humans to become.

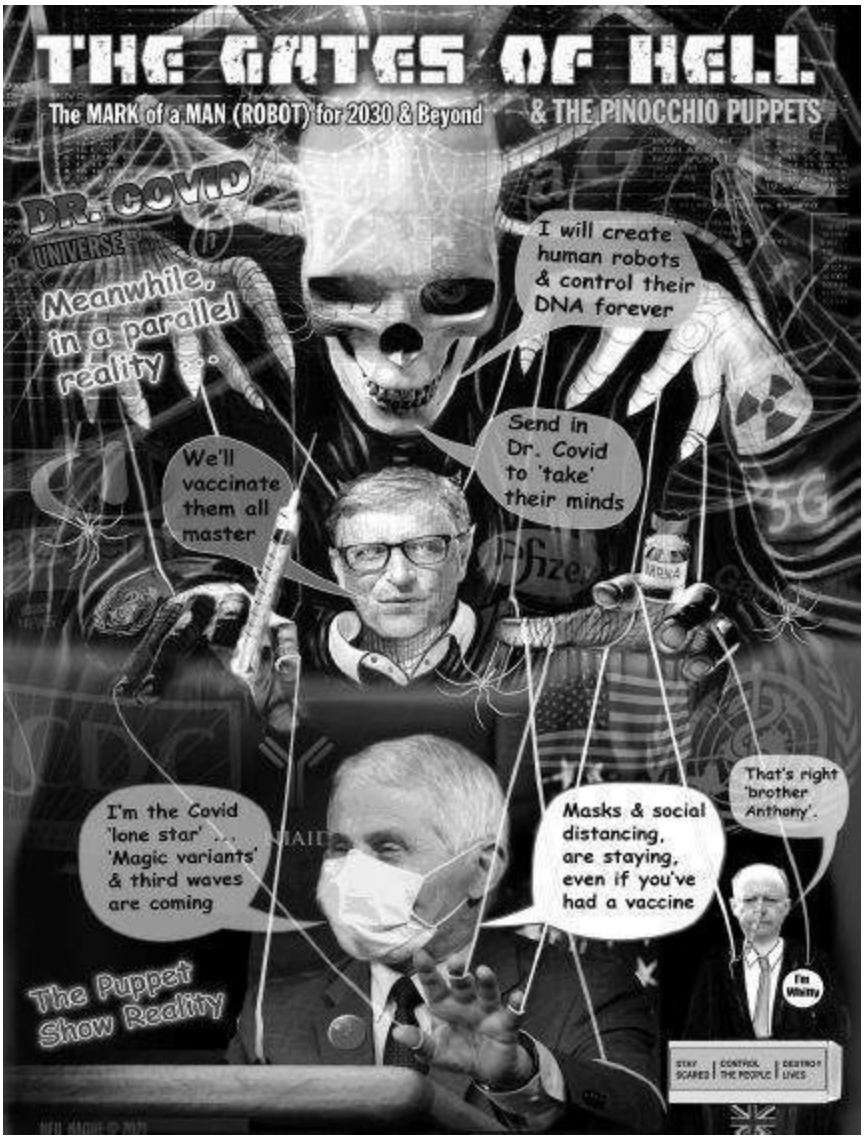
THE GATES OF HELL
The MARK of a MAN (ROBOT) for 2030 & Beyond
& THE PINOCCHIO PUPPETS
DR. COVID
UNIVERSE
Meanwhile, in a parallel reality ...
I will create human robots & control their DNA forever
Send in Dr. Covid to 'take' their minds
We'll vaccinate them all master
5G
I'm the Covid 'lone star' ... 'Magic variants' & third waves are coming
Masks & social distancing, are staying, even if you've had a vaccine
That's right 'brother Anthony'.
I'm Whitty
The Puppet Show Reality

Figure 17: Artist Neil Hague's version of the 'Covid' hierarchy.

Human batteries

A state of such inversion does have its consequences, however. The level of disconnection from the Source of All means that you withdraw from that source of energetic sustenance and creativity. This means that you have to find your own supply of energetic power and it has – *us*. When the Morpheus character in the first *Matrix* movie held up a battery he spoke a profound truth when he said: 'The Matrix is a computer-generated dream world built to keep us under control in order to change the human being into one of

these.' The statement was true in all respects. We do live in a technologically-generated virtual reality simulation (more very shortly) and we have been manipulated to be an energy source for Archontic consciousness. The Disney-Pixar animated movie *Monsters, Inc*. in 2001 symbolised the dynamic when monsters in their world had no energy source and they would enter the human world to terrify children in their beds, catch the child's scream, terror (low-vibrational frequencies), and take that energy back to power the monster world. The lead character you might remember was a single giant eye and the symbolism of the Cult's all-seeing eye was obvious. Every thought and emotion is broadcast as a frequency unique to that thought and emotion. Feelings of love and joy, empathy and compassion, are high, quick, frequencies while fear, depression, anxiety, suffering and hate are low, slow, dense frequencies. Which kind do you think Archontic consciousness can connect with and absorb? In such a low and dense frequency state there's no way it can connect with the energy of love and joy. Archons can only feed off energy compatible with their own frequency and they and their Cult agents want to delete the human world of love and joy and manipulate the transmission of low vibrational frequencies through low-vibrational human mental and emotional states. *We are their energy source*. Wars are energetic banquets to the Archons – a world war even more so – and think how much low-frequency mental and emotional energy has been generated from the consequences for humanity of the 'Covid' hoax orchestrated by Archons incarnate like Gates.

The ancient practice of human sacrifice 'to the gods', continued in secret today by the Cult, is based on the same principle. 'The gods' are Archontic consciousness in different forms and the sacrifice is induced into a state of intense terror to generate the energy the Archontic frequency can absorb. Incarnate Archons in the ritual drink the blood which contains an adrenaline they crave which floods into the bloodstream when people are terrorised. Most of the sacrifices, ancient and modern, are children and the theme of 'sacrificing young virgins to the gods' is just code for children. They

have a particular pre-puberty energy that Archons want more than anything and the energy of the young in general is their target. The California Department of Education wants students to chant the names of Aztec gods (Archontic gods) once worshipped in human sacrifice rituals in a curriculum designed to encourage them to 'challenge racist, bigoted, discriminatory, imperialist/colonial beliefs', join 'social movements that struggle for social justice', and 'build new possibilities for a post-racist, post-systemic racism society'. It's the usual Woke crap that inverts racism and calls it anti-racism. In this case solidarity with 'indigenous tribes' is being used as an excuse to chant the names of 'gods' to which people were sacrificed (and still are in secret). What an example of Woke's inability to see beyond black and white, us and them, They condemn the colonisation of these tribal cultures by Europeans (quite right), but those cultures sacrificing people including children to their 'gods', and mass murdering untold numbers as the Aztecs did, is just fine. One chant is to the Aztec god Tezcatlipoca who had a man sacrificed to him in the 5th month of the Aztec calendar. His heart was cut out and he was eaten. Oh, that's okay then. Come on children … after three … Other sacrificial 'gods' for the young to chant their allegiance include Quetzalcoatl, Huitzilopochtli and Xipe Totec. The curriculum says that 'chants, affirmations, and energizers can be used to bring the class together, build unity around ethnic studies principles and values, and to reinvigorate the class following a lesson that may be emotionally taxing or even when student engagement may appear to be low'. Well, that's the cover story, anyway. Chanting and mantras are the repetition of a particular frequency generated from the vocal cords and chanting the names of these Archontic 'gods' tunes you into their frequency. That is the last thing you want when it allows for energetic synchronisation, attachment and perceptual influence. Initiates chant the names of their 'Gods' in their rituals for this very reason.

Vampires of the Woke

Paedophilia is another way that Archons absorb the energy of children. Paedophiles possessed by Archontic consciousness are used as the conduit during sexual abuse for discarnate Archons to vampire the energy of the young they desire so much. Stupendous numbers of children disappear every year never to be seen again although you would never know from the media. Imagine how much low-vibrational energy has been generated by children during the 'Covid' hoax when so many have become depressed and psychologically destroyed to the point of killing themselves. Shocking numbers of children are now taken by the state from loving parents to be handed to others. I can tell you from long experience of researching this since 1996 that many end up with paedophiles and assets of the Cult through corrupt and Cult-owned social services which in the reframing era has hired many psychopaths and emotionless automatons to do the job. Children are even stolen to order using spurious reasons to take them by the corrupt and secret (because they're corrupt) 'family courts'. I have written in detail in other books, starting with *The Biggest Secret* in 1997, about the ubiquitous connections between the political, corporate, government, intelligence and military elites (Cult operatives) and Satanism and paedophilia. If you go deep enough both networks have an interlocking leadership. The Woke mentality has been developed by the Cult for many reasons: To promote almost every aspect of its agenda; to hijack the traditional political left and turn it fascist; to divide and rule; and to target agenda pushbackers. But there are other reasons which relate to what I am describing here. How many happy and joyful Wokers do you ever see especially at the extreme end? They are a mental and psychological mess consumed by emotional stress and constantly emotionally cocked for the next explosion of indignation at someone referring to a female as a female. They are walking, talking, batteries as Morpheus might say emitting frequencies which both enslave them in low-vibrational bubbles of perceptual limitation and feed the Archons. Add to this the hatred claimed to be love; fascism claimed to 'anti-fascism', racism claimed to be 'anti-racism';

exclusion claimed to inclusion; and the abuse-filled Internet trolling. You have a purpose-built Archontic energy system with not a wind turbine in sight and all founded on Archontic *inversion*. We have whole generations now manipulated to serve the Archons with their actions and energy. They will be doing so their entire adult lives unless they snap out of their Archon-induced trance. Is it really a surprise that Cult billionaires and corporations put so much money their way? Where is the energy of joy and laughter, including laughing at yourself which is confirmation of your own emotional security? Mark Twain said: 'The human race has one really effective weapon, and that is laughter.' We must use it all the time. Woke has destroyed comedy because it has no humour, no joy, sense of irony, or self-deprecation. Its energy is dense and intense. *Mmmmm*, lunch says the Archontic frequency. Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925) was the Austrian philosopher and famous esoteric thinker who established Waldorf education or Steiner schools to treat children like unique expressions of consciousness and not minds to be programmed with the perceptions determined by authority. I'd been writing about this energy vampiring for decades when I was sent in 2016 a quote by Steiner. He was spot on:

> There are beings in the spiritual realms for whom anxiety and fear emanating from human beings offer welcome food. When humans have no anxiety and fear, then these creatures starve. If fear and anxiety radiates from people and they break out in panic, then these creatures find welcome nutrition and they become more and more powerful. These beings are hostile towards humanity. Everything that feeds on negative feelings, on anxiety, fear and superstition, despair or doubt, are in reality hostile forces in super-sensible worlds, launching cruel attacks on human beings, while they are being fed ... These are exactly the feelings that belong to contemporary culture and materialism; because it estranges people from the spiritual world, it is especially suited to evoke hopelessness and fear of the unknown in people, thereby calling up the above mentioned hostile forces against them.

Pause for a moment from this perspective and reflect on what has happened in the world since the start of 2020. Not only will pennies drop, but billion dollar bills. We see the same theme from Don Juan Matus, a Yaqui Indian shaman in Mexico and the information source for Peruvian-born writer, Carlos Castaneda, who wrote a series of

books from the 1960s to 1990s. Don Juan described the force manipulating human society and his name for the Archons was the predator:

> We have a predator that came from the depths of the cosmos and took over the rule of our lives. Human beings are its prisoners. The predator is our lord and master. It has rendered us docile, helpless. If we want to protest, it suppresses our protest. If we want to act independently, it demands that we don't do so ... indeed we are held prisoner!
>
> They took us over because we are food to them, and they squeeze us mercilessly because we are their sustenance. Just as we rear chickens in coops, the predators rear us in human coops, humaneros. Therefore, their food is always available to them.
>
> Different cultures, different eras, same recurring theme.

The 'ennoia' dilemma

Nag Hammadi Gnostic manuscripts say that Archon consciousness has no 'ennoia'. This is directly translated as 'intentionality', but I'll use the term 'creative imagination'. The *All That Is* in awareness of itself is the source of all creativity – all possibility – and the more disconnected you are from that source the more you are subsequently denied 'creative imagination'. Given that Archon consciousness is almost entirely disconnected it severely lacks creativity and has to rely on far more mechanical processes of thought and exploit the creative potential of those that do have 'ennoia'. You can see cases of this throughout human society. Archon consciousness almost entirely dominates the global banking system and if we study how that system works you will appreciate what I mean. Banks manifest 'money' out of nothing by issuing lines of 'credit' which is 'money' that has never, does not, and will never exist except in theory. It's a confidence trick. If you think 'credit' figures-on-a-screen 'money' is worth anything you accept it as payment. If you don't then the whole system collapses through lack of confidence in the value of that 'money'. Archontic bankers with no 'ennoia' are 'lending' 'money' that doesn't exist to humans that *do* have creativity – those that have the inspired ideas and create businesses and products. Archon banking feeds off human creativity

which it controls through 'money' creation and debt. Humans have the creativity and Archons exploit that for their own benefit and control while having none themselves. Archon Internet platforms like Facebook claim joint copyright of everything that creative users post and while Archontic minds like Zuckerberg may officially head that company it will be human creatives on the staff that provide the creative inspiration. When you have limitless 'money' you can then buy other companies established by creative humans. Witness the acquisition record of Facebook, Google and their like. Survey the Archon-controlled music industry and you see non-creative dark suit executives making their fortune from the human creativity of their artists. The cases are endless. Research the history of people like Gates and Zuckerberg and how their empires were built on exploiting the creativity of others. Archon minds cannot create out of nothing, but they are skilled (because they have to be) in what Gnostic texts call 'countermimicry'. They can imitate, but not innovate. Sabbatians trawl the creativity of others through backdoors they install in computer systems through their cybersecurity systems. Archon-controlled China is globally infamous for stealing intellectual property and I remember how Hong Kong, now part of China, became notorious for making counterfeit copies of the creativity of others – 'countermimicry'. With the now pervasive and all-seeing surveillance systems able to infiltrate any computer you can appreciate the potential for Archons to vampire the creativity of humans. Author John Lamb Lash wrote in his book about the Nag Hammadi texts, *Not In His Image*:

> Although they cannot originate anything, because they lack the divine factor of ennoia (intentionality), Archons can imitate with a vengeance. Their expertise is simulation (HAL, virtual reality). The Demiurge [Yaldabaoth] fashions a heaven world copied from the fractal patterns [of the original] ... His construction is celestial kitsch, like the fake Italianate villa of a Mafia don complete with militant angels to guard every portal.

This brings us to something that I have been speaking about since the turn of the millennium. Our reality is a simulation; a virtual reality that we think is real. No, I'm not kidding.

Human reality? Well, virtually

I had pondered for years about whether our reality is 'real' or some kind of construct. I remembered being immensely affected on a visit as a small child in the late 1950s to the then newly-opened Planetarium on the Marylebone Road in London which is now closed and part of the adjacent Madame Tussauds wax museum. It was in the middle of the day, but when the lights went out there was the night sky projected in the Planetarium's domed ceiling and it appeared to be so real. The experience never left me and I didn't know why until around the turn of the millennium when I became certain that our 'night sky' and entire reality is a projection, a virtual reality, akin to the illusory world portrayed in the *Matrix* movies. I looked at the sky one day in this period and it appeared to me like the domed roof of the Planetarium. The release of the first *Matrix* movie in 1999 also provided a synchronistic and perfect visual representation of where my mind had been going for a long time. I hadn't come across the Gnostic Nag Hammadi texts then. When I did years later the correlation was once again astounding. As I read Gnostic accounts from 1,600 years and more earlier it was clear that they were describing the same simulation phenomenon. They tell how the Yaldabaoth 'Demiurge' and Archons created a 'bad copy' of original reality to rule over all that were captured by its illusions and the body was a prison to trap consciousness in the 'bad copy' fake reality. Read how Gnostics describe the 'bad copy' and update that to current times and they are referring to what we would call today a virtual reality simulation.

Author John Lamb Lash said 'the Demiurge fashions a heaven world copied from the fractal patterns' of the original through expertise in 'HAL' or virtual reality simulation. Fractal patterns are part of the energetic information construct of our reality, a sort of blueprint. If these patterns were copied in computer terms it would indeed give you a copy of a 'natural' reality in a non-natural frequency and digital form. The principle is the same as making a copy of a website. The original website still exists, but now you can change the copy version to make it whatever you like and it can

become very different to the original website. Archons have done this with our reality, a *synthetic* copy of prime reality that still exists beyond the frequency walls of the simulation. Trapped within the illusions of this synthetic Matrix, however, were and are human consciousness and other expressions of prime reality and this is why the Archons via the Cult are seeking to make the human body synthetic and give us synthetic AI minds to complete the job of turning the entire reality synthetic including what we perceive to be the natural world. To quote Kurzweil: 'Nanobots will infuse all the matter around us with information. Rocks, trees, everything will become these intelligent creatures.' Yes, *synthetic* 'creatures' just as 'Covid' and other genetically-manipulating 'vaccines' are designed to make the human body synthetic. From this perspective it is obvious why Archons and their Cult are so desperate to infuse synthetic material into every human with their 'Covid' scam.

Let there be (electromagnetic) light

Yaldabaoth, the force that created the simulation, or Matrix, makes sense of the Gnostic reference to 'The Great Architect' and its use by Cult Freemasonry as the name of its deity. The designer of the Matrix in the movies is called 'The Architect' and that trilogy is jam-packed with symbolism relating to these subjects. I have contended for years that the angry Old Testament God (Yaldabaoth) is the 'God' being symbolically 'quoted' in the opening of Genesis as 'creating the world'. This is not the creation of prime reality – it's the creation of the *simulation*. The Genesis 'God' says: 'Let there be Light: and there was light.' But what is this 'Light'? I have said for decades that the speed of light (186,000 miles per second) is not the fastest speed possible as claimed by mainstream science and is in fact the frequency walls or outer limits of the Matrix. You can't have a fastest or slowest anything within all possibility when everything is possible. The human body is encoded to operate within the speed of light or *within the simulation* and thus we see only the tiny frequency band of visible *light*. Near-death experiencers who perceive reality outside the body during temporary 'death' describe a very different

form of light and this is supported by the Nag Hammadi texts. Prime reality beyond the simulation ('Upper Aeons' to the Gnostics) is described as a realm of incredible beauty, bliss, love and harmony – a realm of 'watery light' that is so powerful 'there are no shadows'. Our false reality of Archon control, which Gnostics call the 'Lower Aeons', is depicted as a realm with a different kind of 'light' and described in terms of chaos, 'Hell', 'the Abyss' and 'Outer Darkness', where trapped souls are tormented and manipulated by demons (relate that to the 'Covid' hoax alone). The watery light theme can be found in near-death accounts and it is not the same as *simulation* 'light' which is electromagnetic or radiation light within the speed of light – the 'Lower Aeons'. Simulation 'light' is the 'luminous fire' associated by Gnostics with the Archons. The Bible refers to Yaldabaoth as 'that old serpent, called the Devil, and Satan, which deceiveth the whole world' (Revelation 12:9). I think that making a simulated copy of prime reality ('countermimicry') and changing it dramatically while all the time manipulating humanity to believe it to be real could probably meet the criteria of deceiving the whole world. Then we come to the Cult god Lucifer – the *Light Bringer*. Lucifer is symbolic of Yaldabaoth, the bringer of radiation light that forms the bad copy simulation within the speed of light. 'He' is symbolised by the lighted torch held by the Statue of Liberty and in the name 'Illuminati'. Sabbatian-Frankism declares that Lucifer is the true god and Lucifer is the real god of Freemasonry honoured as their 'Great or Grand Architect of the Universe' (simulation).

I would emphasise, too, the way Archontic technologically-generated luminous fire of radiation has deluged our environment since I was a kid in the 1950s and changed the nature of The Field with which we constantly interact. Through that interaction technological radiation is changing us. The Smart Grid is designed to operate with immense levels of communication power with 5G expanding across the world and 6G, 7G, in the process of development. Radiation is the simulation and the Archontic manipulation system. Why wouldn't the Archon Cult wish to unleash radiation upon us to an ever-greater extreme to form

Kurzweil's 'cloud'? The plan for a synthetic human is related to the need to cope with levels of radiation beyond even anything we've seen so far. Biological humans would not survive the scale of radiation they have in their script. The Smart Grid is a technological sub-reality within the technological simulation to further disconnect five-sense perception from expanded consciousness. It's a technological prison of the mind.

Infusing the 'spirit of darkness'

A recurring theme in religion and native cultures is the manipulation of human genetics by a non-human force and most famously recorded as the biblical 'sons of god' (the god*s* plural in the original) who interbred with the daughters of men. The Nag Hammadi *Apocryphon of John* tells the same story this way:

> He [Yaldabaoth] sent his angels [Archons/demons] to the daughters of men, that they might take some of them for themselves and raise offspring for their enjoyment. And at first they did not succeed. When they had no success, they gathered together again and they made a plan together ... And the angels changed themselves in their likeness into the likeness of their mates, filling them with the spirit of darkness, which they had mixed for them, and with evil ... And they took women and begot children out of the darkness according to the likeness of their spirit.

Possession when a discarnate entity takes over a human body is an age-old theme and continues today. It's very real and I've seen it. Satanic and secret society rituals can create an energetic environment in which entities can attach to initiates and I've heard many stories of how people have changed their personality after being initiated even into lower levels of the Freemasons. I have been inside three Freemasonic temples, one at a public open day and two by just walking in when there was no one around to stop me. They were in Ryde, the town where I live, Birmingham, England, when I was with a group, and Boston, Massachusetts. They all felt the same energetically – dark, dense, low-vibrational and sinister. Demonic attachment can happen while the initiate has no idea what is going on. To them it's just a ritual to get in the Masons and do a bit of good

business. In the far more extreme rituals of Satanism human possession is even more powerful and they are designed to make possession possible. The hierarchy of the Cult is dictated by the power and perceived status of the possessing Archon. In this way the Archon hierarchy becomes the Cult hierarchy. Once the entity has attached it can influence perception and behaviour and if it attaches to the extreme then so much of its energy (information) infuses into the body information field that the hologram starts to reflect the nature of the possessing entity. This is the *Exorcist* movie type of possession when facial features change and it's known as shapeshifting. Islam's Jinn are said to be invisible tricksters who change shape, 'whisper', confuse and take human form. These are all traits of the Archons and other versions of the same phenomenon. Extreme possession could certainty infuse the 'spirit of darkness' into a partner during sex as the Nag Hammadi texts appear to describe. Such an infusion can change genetics which is also energetic information. Human genetics is information and the 'spirit of darkness' is information. Mix one with the other and change must happen. Islam has the concept of a 'Jinn baby' through possession of the mother and by Jinn taking human form. There are many ways that human genetics can be changed and remember that Archons have been aware all along of advanced techniques to do this. What is being done in human society today – and far more – was known about by Archons at the time of the 'fallen ones' and their other versions described in religions and cultures.

Archons and their human-world Cult are obsessed with genetics as we see today and they know this dictates how information is processed into perceived reality during a human life. They needed to produce a human form that would decode the simulation and this is symbolically known as 'Adam and Eve' who left the 'garden' (prime reality) and 'fell' into Matrix reality. The simulation is not a 'physical' construct (there is no 'physical'); it is a source of information. Think Wi-Fi again. The simulation is an energetic field encoded with information and body-brain systems are designed to decode that information encoded in wave or frequency form which

is transmitted to the brain as electrical signals. These are decoded by the brain to construct our sense of reality – an illusory 'physical' world that only exists in the brain or the mind. Virtual reality games mimic this process using the same sensory decoding system. Information is fed to the senses to decode a virtual reality that can appear so real, but isn't (Figs 18 and 19). Some scientists believe – and I agree with them – that what we perceive as 'physical' reality only exists when we are looking or observing. The act of perception or focus triggers the decoding systems which turn waveform information into holographic reality. When we are not observing something our reality reverts from a holographic state to a waveform state. This relates to the same principle as a falling tree not making a noise unless someone is there to hear it or decode it. The concept makes sense from the simulation perspective. A computer is not decoding all the information in a Wi-Fi field all the time and only decodes or brings into reality on the screen that part of Wi-Fi that it's decoding – focusing upon – at that moment.

Figure 18: Virtual reality technology 'hacks' into the body's five-sense decoding system.

Figure 19: The result can be experienced as very 'real'.

Interestingly, Professor Donald Hoffman at the Department of Cognitive Sciences at the University of California, Irvine, says that our experienced reality is like a computer interface that shows us only the level with which we interact while hiding all that exists beyond it: 'Evolution shaped us with a user interface that hides the truth. Nothing that we see is the truth – the very language of space and time and objects is the wrong language to describe reality.' He is correct in what he says on so many levels. Space and time are not a universal reality. They are a phenomenon of decoded *simulation* reality as part of the process of enslaving our sense of reality. Near-death experiencers report again and again how space and time did not exist as we perceive them once they were free of the body – body decoding systems. You can appreciate from this why Archons and their Cult are so desperate to entrap human attention in the five senses where we are in the Matrix and of the Matrix. Opening your mind to expanded states of awareness takes you beyond the information confines of the simulation and you become aware of knowledge and insights denied to you before. This is what we call 'awakening' – *awakening from the Matrix* – and in the final chapter I will relate this to current events.

Where are the 'aliens'?

A simulation would explain the so-called 'Fermi Paradox' named after Italian physicist Enrico Fermi (1901-1954) who created the first nuclear reactor. He considered the question of why there is such a lack of extraterrestrial activity when there are so many stars and planets in an apparently vast universe; but what if the night sky that we see, or think we do, is a simulated projection as I say? If you control the simulation and your aim is to hold humanity fast in essential ignorance would you want other forms of life including advanced life coming and going sharing information with humanity? Or would you want them to believe they were isolated and apparently alone? Themes of human isolation and apartness are common whether they be the perception of a lifeless universe or the fascist isolation laws of the 'Covid' era. Paradoxically the very

existence of a simulation means that we are not alone when some force had to construct it. My view is that experiences that people have reported all over the world for centuries with Reptilians and Grey entities are Archon phenomena as Nag Hammadi texts describe; and that benevolent 'alien' interactions are non-human groups that come in and out of the simulation by overcoming Archon attempts to keep them out. It should be highlighted, too, that Reptilians and Greys are obsessed with *genetics* and *technology* as related by cultural accounts and those who say they have been abducted by them. Technology is their way of overcoming some of the limitations in their creative potential and our technology-driven and controlled human society of today is *arch*etypical Archon-Reptilian-Grey modus operandi. Technocracy is really *Archon*tocracy. The Universe does not have to be as big as it appears with a simulation. There is no space or distance only information decoded into holographic reality. What we call 'space' is only the absence of holographic 'objects' and that 'space' is The Field of energetic information which connects everything into a single whole. The same applies with the artificially-generated information field of the simulation. The Universe is not big or small as a physical reality. It is decoded information, that's all, and its perceived size is decided by the way the simulation is encoded to make it appear. The entire night sky as we perceive it only exists in our brain and so where are those 'millions of light years'? The 'stars' on the ceiling of the Planetarium looked a vast distance away.

There's another point to mention about 'aliens'. I have been highlighting since the 1990s the plan to stage a fake 'alien invasion' to justify the centralisation of global power and a world military. Nazi scientist Werner von Braun, who was taken to America by Operation Paperclip after World War Two to help found NASA, told his American assistant Dr Carol Rosin about the Cult agenda when he knew he was dying in 1977. Rosin said that he told her about a sequence that would lead to total human control by a one-world government. This included threats from terrorism, rogue nations, meteors and asteroids before finally an 'alien invasion'. All of these

things, von Braun said, would be bogus and what I would refer to as a No-Problem-Reaction-Solution. Keep this in mind when 'the aliens are coming' is the new mantra. The aliens are not coming – they are *already here* and they have infiltrated human society while looking human. French-Canadian investigative journalist Serge Monast said in 1994 that he had uncovered a NASA/military operation called Project Blue Beam which fits with what Werner von Braun predicted. Monast died of a 'heart attack' in 1996 the day after he was arrested and spent a night in prison. He was 51. He said Blue Beam was a plan to stage an alien invasion that would include religious figures beamed holographically into the sky as part of a global manipulation to usher in a 'new age' of worshipping what I would say is the Cult 'god' Yaldabaoth in a one-world religion. Fake holographic asteroids are also said to be part of the plan which again syncs with von Braun. How could you stage an illusory threat from asteroids unless they were holographic inserts? This is pretty straightforward given the advanced technology outside the public arena and the fact that our 'physical' reality is holographic anyway. Information fields would be projected and we would decode them into the illusion of a 'physical' asteroid. If they can sell a global 'pandemic' with a 'virus' that doesn't exist what will humans not believe if government and media tell them?

All this is particularly relevant as I write with the Pentagon planning to release in June, 2021, information about 'UFO sightings'. I have been following the UFO story since the early 1990s and the common theme throughout has been government and military denials and cover up. More recently, however, the Pentagon has suddenly become more talkative and apparently open with Air Force pilot radar images released of unexplained craft moving and changing direction at speeds well beyond anything believed possible with human technology. Then, in March, 2021, former Director of National Intelligence John Ratcliffe said a Pentagon report months later in June would reveal a great deal of information about UFO sightings unknown to the public. He said the report would have 'massive implications'. The order to do this was included bizarrely

in a $2.3 trillion 'coronavirus' relief and government funding bill passed by the Trump administration at the end of 2020. I would add some serious notes of caution here. I have been pointing out since the 1990s that the US military and intelligence networks have long had craft – 'flying saucers' or anti-gravity craft – which any observer would take to be extraterrestrial in origin. Keeping this knowledge from the public allows craft flown by *humans* to be perceived as alien visitations. I am not saying that 'aliens' do not exist. I would be the last one to say that, but we have to be streetwise here. President Ronald Reagan told the UN General Assembly in 1987: 'I occasionally think how quickly our differences worldwide would vanish if we were facing an alien threat from outside this world.' That's the idea. Unite against a common 'enemy' with a common purpose behind your 'saviour force' (the Cult) as this age-old technique of mass manipulation goes global.

Science moves this way …

I could find only one other person who was discussing the simulation hypothesis publicly when I concluded it was real. This was Nick Bostrom, a Swedish-born philosopher at the University of Oxford, who has explored for many years the possibility that human reality is a computer simulation although his version and mine are not the same. Today the simulation and holographic reality hypothesis have increasingly entered the scientific mainstream. Well, the more open-minded mainstream, that is. Here are a few of the ever-gathering examples. American nuclear physicist Silas Beane led a team of physicists at the University of Bonn in Germany pursuing the question of whether we live in a simulation. They concluded that we probably do and it was likely based on a lattice of cubes. They found that cosmic rays align with that specific pattern. The team highlighted the Greisen–Zatsepin–Kuzmin (GZK) limit which refers to cosmic ray particle interaction with cosmic background radiation that creates an apparent boundary for cosmic ray particles. They say in a paper entitled 'Constraints on the Universe as a Numerical Simulation' that this 'pattern of constraint' is exactly what you

would find with a computer simulation. They also made the point that a simulation would create its own 'laws of physics' that would limit possibility. I've been making the same point for decades that the *perceived* laws of physics relate only to this reality, or what I would later call the simulation. When designers write codes to create computer and virtual reality games they are the equivalent of the laws of physics for that game. Players interact within the limitations laid out by the coding. In the same way those who wrote the codes for the simulation decided the laws of physics that would apply. These can be overridden by expanded states of consciousness, but not by those enslaved in only five-sense awareness where simulation codes rule. Overriding the codes is what people call 'miracles'. They are not. They are bypassing the encoded limits of the simulation. A population caught in simulation perception would have no idea that this was their plight. As the Bonn paper said: 'Like a prisoner in a pitch-black cell we would not be able to see the "walls" of our prison,' That's true if people remain mesmerised by the five senses. Open to expanded awareness and those walls become very clear. The main one is the speed of light.

American theoretical physicist James Gates is another who has explored the simulation question and found considerable evidence to support the idea. Gates was Professor of Physics at the University of Maryland, Director of The Center for String and Particle Theory, and on Barack Obama's Council of Advisors on Science and Technology. He and his team found *computer codes* of digital data embedded in the fabric of our reality. They relate to on-off electrical charges of 1 and 0 in the binary system used by computers. 'We have no idea what they are doing there', Gates said. They found within the energetic fabric mathematical sequences known as error-correcting codes or block codes that 'reboot' data to its original state or 'default settings' when something knocks it out of sync. Gates was asked if he had found a set of equations embedded in our reality indistinguishable from those that drive search engines and browsers and he said: 'That is correct.' Rich Terrile, director of the Centre for Evolutionary Computation and Automated Design at NASA's Jet

Propulsion Laboratory, has said publicly that he believes the Universe is a digital hologram that must have been created by a form of intelligence. I agree with that in every way. Waveform information is delivered electrically by the senses to the brain which constructs a *digital* holographic reality that we call the 'world'. This digital level of reality can be read by the esoteric art of numerology. Digital holograms are at the cutting edge of holographics today. We have digital technology everywhere designed to access and manipulate our digital level of perceived reality. Synthetic mRNA in 'Covid vaccines' has a digital component to manipulate the body's digital 'operating system'.

Reality is numbers

How many know that our reality can be broken down to numbers and codes that are the same as computer games? Max Tegmark, a physicist at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), is the author of *Our Mathematical Universe* in which he lays out how reality can be entirely described by numbers and maths in the way that a video game is encoded with the 'physics' of computer games. Our world and computer virtual reality are essentially the same. Tegmark imagines the perceptions of characters in an advanced computer game when the graphics are so good they don't know they are in a game. They think they can bump into real objects (electromagnetic resistance in our reality), fall in love and feel emotions like excitement. When they began to study the apparently 'physical world' of the video game they would realise that everything was made of pixels (which have been found in our energetic reality as must be the case when on one level our world is digital). What computer game characters thought was physical 'stuff', Tegmark said, could actually be broken down into numbers:

> And we're exactly in this situation in our world. We look around and it doesn't seem that mathematical at all, but everything we see is made out of elementary particles like quarks and electrons. And what properties does an electron have? Does it have a smell or a colour or a texture? No! ... We physicists have come up with geeky names for [Electron] properties, like

electric charge, or spin, or lepton number, but the electron doesn't care what we call it, the properties are just numbers.

This is the illusory reality Gnostics were describing. This is the simulation. The A, C, G, and T codes of DNA have a binary value – A and C = 0 while G and T = 1. This has to be when the simulation is digital and the body must be digital to interact with it. Recurring mathematical sequences are encoded throughout reality and the body. They include the Fibonacci sequence in which the two previous numbers are added to get the next one, as in ... 1, 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 13, 21, 34, 55, etc. The sequence is encoded in the human face and body, proportions of animals, DNA, seed heads, pine cones, trees, shells, spiral galaxies, hurricanes and the number of petals in a flower. The list goes on and on. There are fractal patterns – a 'never-ending pattern that is infinitely complex and self-similar across all scales in the as above, so below, principle of holograms. These and other famous recurring geometrical and mathematical sequences such as Phi, Pi, Golden Mean, Golden Ratio and Golden Section are *computer codes* of the simulation. I had to laugh and give my head a shake the day I finished this book and it went into the production stage. I was sent an article in *Scientific American* published in April, 2021, with the headline 'Confirmed! We Live in a Simulation'. Two decades after I first said our reality is a simulation and the speed of light is it's outer limit the article suggested that we do live in a simulation and that the speed of light is its outer limit. I left school at 15 and never passed a major exam in my life while the writer was up to his eyes in qualifications. As I will explain in the final chapter *knowing* is far better than thinking and they come from very different sources. The article rightly connected the speed of light to the processing speed of the 'Matrix' and said what has been in my books all this time … 'If we are in a simulation, as it appears, then space is an abstract property written in code. It is not real'. No it's not and if we live in a simulation something created it and it wasn't *us*. 'That David Icke says we are manipulated by aliens' – he's crackers.'

Wow …

The reality that humanity thinks is so real is an illusion. Politicians, governments, scientists, doctors, academics, law enforcement, media, school and university curriculums, on and on, are all founded on a world that *does not exist* except as a simulated prison cell. Is it such a stretch to accept that 'Covid' doesn't exist when our entire 'physical' reality doesn't exist? Revealed here is the knowledge kept under raps in the Cult networks of compartmentalised secrecy to control humanity's sense of reality by inducing the population to believe in a reality that's not real. If it wasn't so tragic in its experiential consequences the whole thing would be hysterically funny. None of this is new to Renegade Minds. Ancient Greek philosopher Plato (about 428 to about 347BC) was a major influence on Gnostic belief and he described the human plight thousands of years ago with his Allegory of the Cave. He told the symbolic story of prisoners living in a cave who had never been outside. They were chained and could only see one wall of the cave while behind them was a fire that they could not see. Figures walked past the fire casting shadows on the prisoners' wall and those moving shadows became their sense of reality. Some prisoners began to study the shadows and were considered experts on them (today's academics and scientists), but what they studied was only an illusion (today's academics and scientists). A prisoner escaped from the cave and saw reality as it really is. When he returned to report this revelation they didn't believe him, called him mad and threatened to kill him if he tried to set them free. Plato's tale is not only a brilliant analogy of the human plight and our illusory reality. It describes, too, the dynamics of the 'Covid' hoax. I have only skimmed the surface of these subjects here. The aim of this book is to crisply connect all essential dots to put what is happening today into its true context. All subject areas and their connections in this chapter are covered in great evidential detail in *Everything You Need To Know, But Have Never Been Told* and *The Answer*.

They say that bewildered people 'can't see the forest for the trees'. Humanity, however, can't see the forest for the *twigs*. The five senses

see only twigs while Renegade Minds can see the forest and it's the forest where the answers lie with the connections that reveals. Breaking free of perceptual programming so the forest can be seen is the way we turn all this around. Not breaking free is how humanity got into this mess. The situation may seem hopeless, but I promise you it's not. We are a perceptual heartbeat from paradise if only we knew.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Escaping Wetiko

Life is simply a vacation from the infinite
Dean Cavanagh

Renegade Minds weave the web of life and events and see common themes in the apparently random. They are always there if you look for them and their pursuit is aided by incredible synchronicity that comes when your mind is open rather than mesmerised by what it thinks it can see.

Infinite awareness is infinite possibility and the more of infinite possibility that we access the more becomes infinitely possible. That may be stating the apparently obvious, but it is a devastatingly-powerful fact that can set us free. We are a point of attention within an infinity of consciousness. The question is how much of that infinity do we choose to access? How much knowledge, insight, awareness, wisdom, do we want to connect with and explore? If your focus is only in the five senses you will be influenced by a fraction of infinite awareness. I mean a range so tiny that it gives new meaning to infinitesimal. Limitation of self-identity and a sense of the possible limit accordingly your range of consciousness. We are what we think we are. Life is what we think it is. The dream is the dreamer and the dreamer is the dream. Buddhist philosophy puts it this way: 'As a thing is viewed, so it appears.' Most humans live in the realm of touch, taste, see, hear, and smell and that's the limit of their sense of the possible and sense of self. Many will follow a religion and speak of a God in his heaven, but their lives are still

dominated by the five senses in their perceptions and actions. The five senses become the arbiter of everything. When that happens all except a smear of infinity is sealed away from influence by the rigid, unyielding, reality bubbles that are the five-sense human or Phantom Self. Archon Cult methodology is to isolate consciousness within five-sense reality – the simulation – and then program that consciousness with a sense of self and the world through a deluge of life-long information designed to instil the desired perception that allows global control. Efforts to do this have increased dramatically with identity politics as identity bubbles are squeezed into the minutiae of five-sense detail which disconnect people even more profoundly from the infinite 'I'.

Five-sense focus and self-identity are like a firewall that limits access to the infinite realms. You only perceive one radio or television station and no other. We'll take that literally for a moment. Imagine a vast array of stations giving different information and angles on reality, but you only ever listen to one. Here we have the human plight in which the population is overwhelmingly confined to CultFM. This relates only to the frequency range of CultFM and limits perception and insight to that band – limits *possibility* to that band. It means you are connecting with an almost imperceptibly minuscule range of possibility and creative potential within the infinite Field. It's a world where everything seems apart from everything else and where synchronicity is rare. Synchronicity is defined in the dictionary as 'the happening by chance of two or more related or similar events at the same time'. Use of 'by chance' betrays a complete misunderstanding of reality. Synchronicity is not 'by chance'. As people open their minds, or 'awaken' to use the term, they notice more and more coincidences in their lives, bits of 'luck', apparently miraculous happenings that put them in the right place at the right time with the right people. Days become peppered with 'fancy meeting you here' and 'what are the chances of that?' My entire life has been lived like this and ever more so since my own colossal awakening in 1990 and 91 which transformed my sense of reality. Synchronicity is not 'by chance'; it is by accessing expanded

realms of possibility which allow expanded potential for manifestation. People broadcasting the same vibe from the same openness of mind tend to be drawn 'by chance' to each other through what I call frequency magnetism and it's not only people. In the last more than 30 years incredible synchronicity has also led me through the Cult maze to information in so many forms and to crucial personal experiences. These 'coincidences' have allowed me to put the puzzle pieces together across an enormous array of subjects and situations. Those who have breached the bubble of five-sense reality will know exactly what I mean and this escape from the perceptual prison cell is open to everyone whenever they make that choice. This may appear super-human when compared with the limitations of 'human', but it's really our natural state. 'Human' as currently experienced is consciousness in an unnatural state of induced separation from the infinity of the whole. I'll come to how this transformation into unity can be made when I have described in more detail the force that holds humanity in servitude by denying this access to infinite self.

The Wetiko factor

I have been talking and writing for decades about the way five-sense mind is systematically barricaded from expanded awareness. I have used the analogy of a computer (five-sense mind) and someone at the keyboard (expanded awareness). Interaction between the computer and the operator is symbolic of the interaction between five-sense mind and expanded awareness. The computer directly experiences the Internet and the operator experiences the Internet via the computer which is how it's supposed to be – the two working as one. Archons seek to control that point where the operator connects with the computer to stop that interaction (Fig 20). Now the operator is banging the keyboard and clicking the mouse, but the computer is not responding and this happens when the computer is taken over – *possessed* – by an appropriately-named computer 'virus'. The operator has lost all influence over the computer which goes its own way making decisions under the control of the 'virus'. I have

just described the dynamic through which the force known to Gnostics as Yaldabaoth and Archons disconnects five-sense mind from expanded awareness to imprison humanity in perceptual servitude.

Figure 20: The mind 'virus' I have been writing about for decades seeks to isolate five-sense mind (the computer) from the true 'I'. (Image by Neil Hague).

About a year ago I came across a Native American concept of Wetiko which describes precisely the same phenomenon. Wetiko is the spelling used by the Cree and there are other versions including wintiko and windigo used by other tribal groups. They spell the name with lower case, but I see Wetiko as a proper noun as with Archons and prefer a capital. I first saw an article about Wetiko by writer and researcher Paul Levy which so synced with what I had been writing about the computer/operator disconnection and later the Archons. I then read his book, the fascinating *Dispelling Wetiko, Breaking the Spell of Evil*. The parallels between what I had concluded long before and the Native American concept of Wetiko were so clear and obvious that it was almost funny. For Wetiko see the Gnostic Archons for sure and the Jinn, the Predators, and every other name for a force of evil, inversion and chaos. Wetiko is the Native American name for the force that divides the computer from

the operator (Fig 21). Indigenous author Jack D. Forbes, a founder of the Native American movement in the 1960s, wrote another book about Wetiko entitled *Columbus And Other Cannibals – The Wetiko Disease of Exploitation, Imperialism, and Terrorism* which I also read. Forbes says that Wetiko refers to an evil person or spirit 'who terrorizes other creatures by means of terrible acts, including cannibalism'. Zulu shaman Credo Mutwa told me that African accounts tell how cannibalism was brought into the world by the Chitauri 'gods' – another manifestation of Wetiko. The distinction between 'evil person or spirit' relates to Archons/Wetiko possessing a human or acting as pure consciousness. Wetiko is said to be a sickness of the soul or spirit and a state of being that takes but gives nothing back – the Cult and its operatives perfectly described. Black Hawk, a Native American war leader defending their lands from confiscation, said European invaders had 'poisoned hearts' – Wetiko hearts – and that this would spread to native societies. Mention of the heart is very significant as we shall shortly see. Forbes writes: 'Tragically, the history of the world for the past 2,000 years is, in great part, the story of the epidemiology of the wetiko disease.' Yes, and much longer. Forbes is correct when he says: 'The wetikos destroyed Egypt and Babylon and Athens and Rome and Tenochtitlan [capital of the Aztec empire] and perhaps now they will destroy the entire earth.' Evil, he said, is the number one export of a Wetiko culture – see its globalisation with 'Covid'. Constant war, mass murder, suffering of all kinds, child abuse, Satanism, torture and human sacrifice are all expressions of Wetiko and the Wetiko possessed. The world is Wetiko made manifest, *but it doesn't have to be*. There is a way out of this even now.

Figure 21: The mind 'virus' is known to Native Americans as 'Wetiko'. (Image by Neil Hague).

Cult of Wetiko

Wetiko is the Yaldabaoth frequency distortion that seeks to attach to human consciousness and absorb it into its own. Once this connection is made Wetiko can drive the perceptions of the target which they believe to be coming from their own mind. All the horrors of history and today from mass killers to Satanists, paedophiles like Jeffrey Epstein and other psychopaths, are the embodiment of Wetiko and express its state of being in all its grotesqueness. The Cult is Wetiko incarnate, Yaldabaoth incarnate, and it seeks to facilitate Wetiko assimilation of humanity in totality into its distortion by manipulating the population into low frequency states that match its own. Paul Levy writes: 'Holographically enforced within the psyche of every human being the wetiko virus pervades and underlies the entire field of consciousness, and can therefore potentially manifest through any one of us at any moment if we are not mindful.' The 'Covid' hoax has achieved this with many people, but others have not fallen into Wetiko's frequency lair. Players in the 'Covid' human catastrophe including Gates, Schwab, Tedros, Fauci, Whitty, Vallance, Johnson, Hancock, Ferguson, Drosten, and all the rest, including the psychopath psychologists, are expressions of Wetiko. This is why

they have no compassion or empathy and no emotional consequence for what they do that would make them stop doing it. Observe all the people who support the psychopaths in authority against the Pushbackers despite the damaging impact the psychopaths have on their own lives and their family's lives. You are again looking at Wetiko possession which prevents them seeing through the lies to the obvious scam going on. *Why can't they see it?* Wetiko won't let them see it. The perceptual divide that has now become a chasm is between the Wetikoed and the non-Wetikoed.

Paul Levy describes Wetiko in the same way that I have long described the Archontic force. They are the same distorted consciousness operating across dimensions of reality: '… the subtle body of wetiko is not located in the third dimension of space and time, literally existing in another dimension … it is able to affect ordinary lives by mysteriously interpenetrating into our three-dimensional world.' Wetiko does this through its incarnate representatives in the Cult and by weaving itself into The Field which on our level of reality is the electromagnetic information field of the simulation or Matrix. More than that, the simulation *is* Wetiko / Yaldabaoth. Caleb Scharf, Director of Astrobiology at Columbia University, has speculated that 'alien life' could be so advanced that it has transcribed itself into the quantum realm to become what we call physics. He said intelligence indistinguishable from the fabric of the Universe would solve many of its greatest mysteries:

> Perhaps hyper-advanced life isn't just external. Perhaps it's already all around. It is embedded in what we perceive to be physics itself, from the root behaviour of particles and fields to the phenomena of complexity and emergence ... In other words, life might not just be in the equations. It might BE the equations [My emphasis].

Scharf said it is possible that 'we don't recognise advanced life because it forms an integral and unsuspicious part of what we've considered to be the natural world'. I agree. Wetiko/Yaldabaoth *is* the simulation. We are literally in the body of the beast. But that doesn't mean it has to control us. We all have the power to overcome Wetiko

influence and the Cult knows that. I doubt it sleeps too well because it knows that.

Which Field?

This, I suggest, is how it all works. There are two Fields. One is the fierce electromagnetic light of the Matrix within the speed of light; the other is the 'watery light' of The Field beyond the walls of the Matrix that connects with the Great Infinity. Five-sense mind and the decoding systems of the body attach us to the Field of Matrix light. They have to or we could not experience this reality. Five-sense mind sees only the Matrix Field of information while our expanded consciousness is part of the Infinity Field. When we open our minds, and most importantly our hearts, to the Infinity Field we have a mission control which gives us an expanded perspective, a road map, to understand the nature of the five-sense world. If we are isolated only in five-sense mind there is no mission control. We're on our own trying to understand a world that's constantly feeding us information to ensure we do not understand. People in this state can feel 'lost' and bewildered with no direction or radar. You can see ever more clearly those who are influenced by the Fields of Big Infinity or little five-sense mind simply by their views and behaviour with regard to the 'Covid' hoax. We have had this division throughout known human history with the mass of the people on one side and individuals who could see and intuit beyond the walls of the simulation – Plato's prisoner who broke out of the cave and saw reality for what it is. Such people have always been targeted by Wetiko/Archon-possessed authority, burned at the stake or demonised as mad, bad and dangerous. The Cult today and its global network of 'anti-hate', 'anti-fascist' Woke groups are all expressions of Wetiko attacking those exposing the conspiracy, 'Covid' lies and the 'vaccine' agenda.

Woke as a whole is Wetiko which explains its black and white mentality and how at one it is with the Wetiko-possessed Cult. Paul Levy said: 'To be in this paradigm is to still be under the thrall of a two-valued logic – where things are either true or false – of a

wetikoized mind.' Wetiko consciousness is in a permanent rage, therefore so is Woke, and then there is Woke inversion and contradiction. 'Anti-fascists' act like fascists because fascists *and* 'anti-fascists' are both Wetiko at work. Political parties act the same while claiming to be different for the same reason. Secret society and satanic rituals are attaching initiates to Wetiko and the cold, ruthless, psychopathic mentality that secures the positions of power all over the world is Wetiko. Reframing 'training programmes' have the same cumulative effect of attaching Wetiko and we have their graduates described as automatons and robots with a cold, psychopathic, uncaring demeanour. They are all traits of Wetiko possession and look how many times they have been described in this book and elsewhere with regard to personnel behind 'Covid' including the police and medical profession. Climbing the greasy pole in any profession in a Wetiko society requires traits of Wetiko to get there and that is particularly true of politics which is not about fair competition and pre-eminence of ideas. It is founded on how many backs you can stab and arses you can lick. This culminated in the global 'Covid' coordination between the Wetiko possessed who pulled it off in all the different countries without a trace of empathy and compassion for their impact on humans. Our sight sense can see only holographic form and not the Field which connects holographic form. Therefore we perceive 'physical' objects with 'space' in between. In fact that 'space' is energy/consciousness operating on multiple frequencies. One of them is Wetiko and that connects the Cult psychopaths, those who submit to the psychopaths, and those who serve the psychopaths in the media operations of the world. Wetiko is Gates. Wetiko is the mask-wearing submissive. Wetiko is the fake journalist and 'fact-checker'. The Wetiko Field is coordinating the whole thing. Psychopaths, gofers, media operatives, 'anti-hate' hate groups, 'fact-checkers' and submissive people work as one unit *even without human coordination* because they are attached to the *same* Field which is organising it all (Fig 22). Paul Levy is here describing how Wetiko-possessed people are drawn together and refuse to let any information breach their rigid

perceptions. He was writing long before 'Covid', but I think you will recognise followers of the 'Covid' religion *oh just a little bit*:

People who are channelling the vibratory frequency of wetiko align with each other through psychic resonance to reinforce their unspoken shared agreement so as to uphold their deranged view of reality. Once an unconscious content takes possession of certain individuals, it irresistibly draws them together by mutual attraction and knits them into groups tied together by their shared madness that can easily swell into an avalanche of insanity.

A psychic epidemic is a closed system, which is to say that it is insular and not open to any new information or informing influences from the outside world which contradict its fixed, limited, and limiting perspective.

There we have the Woke mind and the 'Covid' mind. Compatible resonance draws the awakening together, too, which is clearly happening today.

Figure 22: The Wetiko Field from which the Cult pyramid and its personnel are made manifest. (Image by Neil Hague).

Spiritual servitude

Wetiko doesn't care about humans. It's not human; it just possesses humans for its own ends and the effect (depending on the scale of

possession) can be anything from extreme psychopathy to unquestioning obedience. Wetiko's worst nightmare is for human consciousness to expand beyond the simulation. Everything is focussed on stopping that happening through control of information, thus perception, thus frequency. The 'education system', media, science, medicine, academia, are all geared to maintaining humanity in five-sense servitude as is the constant stimulation of low-vibrational mental and emotional states (see 'Covid'). Wetiko seeks to dominate those subconscious spaces between five-sense perception and expanded consciousness where the computer meets the operator. From these subconscious hiding places Wetiko speaks to us to trigger urges and desires that we take to be our own and manipulate us into anything from low-vibrational to psychopathic states. Remember how Islam describes the Jinn as invisible tricksters that 'whisper' and confuse. Wetiko is the origin of the 'trickster god' theme that you find in cultures all over the world. Jinn, like the Archons, are Wetiko which is terrified of humans awakening and reconnecting with our true self for then its energy source has gone. With that the feedback loop breaks between Wetiko and human perception that provides the energetic momentum on which its very existence depends as a force of evil. Humans are both its target and its source of survival, but only if we are operating in low-vibrational states of fear, hate, depression and the background anxiety that most people suffer. We are Wetiko's target because we are its key to survival. It needs us, not the other way round. Paul Levy writes:

A vampire has no intrinsic, independent, substantial existence in its own right; it only exists in relation to us. The pathogenic, vampiric mind-parasite called wetiko is nothing in itself – not being able to exist from its own side – yet it has a 'virtual reality' such that it can potentially destroy our species …

…The fact that a vampire is not reflected by a mirror can also mean that what we need to see is that there's nothing, no-thing to see, other than ourselves. The fact that wetiko is the expression of something inside of us means that the cure for wetiko is with us as well. The critical issue is finding this cure within us and then putting it into effect.

Evil begets evil because if evil does not constantly expand and find new sources of energetic sustenance its evil, its *distortion*, dies with the assimilation into balance and harmony. Love is the garlic to Wetiko's vampire. Evil, the absence of love, cannot exist in the presence of love. I think I see a way out of here. I have emphasised so many times over the decades that the Archons/Wetiko and their Cult are not all powerful. *They are not*. I don't care how it looks even now *they are not*. I have not called them little boys in short trousers for effect. I have said it because it is true. Wetiko's insatiable desire for power over others is not a sign of its omnipotence, but its insecurity. Paul Levy writes: 'Due to the primal fear which ultimately drives it and which it is driven to cultivate, wetiko's body politic has an intrinsic and insistent need for centralising power and control so as to create imagined safety for itself.' *Yeeeeeees!* Exactly! Why does Wetiko want humans in an ongoing state of fear? Wetiko itself *is* fear and it is petrified of love. As evil is an absence of love, so love is an absence of fear. Love conquers all and *especially* Wetiko which *is* fear. Wetiko brought fear into the world when it wasn't here before. *Fear* was the 'fall', the fall into low-frequency ignorance and illusion – fear is **F**alse **E**motion **A**ppearing **R**eal. The simulation is driven and energised by fear because Wetiko/Yaldabaoth (fear) *are* the simulation. Fear is the absence of love and Wetiko is the absence of love.

Wetiko today

We can now view current events from this level of perspective. The 'Covid' hoax has generated momentous amounts of ongoing fear, anxiety, depression and despair which have empowered Wetiko. No wonder people like Gates have been the instigators when they are Wetiko incarnate and exhibit every trait of Wetiko in the extreme. See how cold and unemotional these people are like Gates and his cronies, how dead of eye they are. That's Wetiko. Sabbatians are Wetiko and everything they control including the World Health Organization, Big Pharma and the 'vaccine' makers, national 'health'

hierarchies, corporate media, Silicon Valley, the banking system, and the United Nations with its planned transformation into world government. All are controlled and possessed by the Wetiko distortion into distorting human society in its image. We are with this knowledge at the gateway to understanding the world. Divisions of race, culture, creed and sexuality are diversions to hide the real division between those possessed and influenced by Wetiko and those that are not. The 'Covid' hoax has brought both clearly into view. Human behaviour is not about race. Tyrants and dictatorships come in all colours and creeds. What unites the US president bombing the innocent and an African tribe committing genocide against another as in Rwanda? What unites them? *Wetiko*. All wars are Wetiko, all genocide is Wetiko, all hunger over centuries in a world of plenty is Wetiko. Children going to bed hungry, including in the West, is Wetiko. Cult-generated Woke racial divisions that focus on the body are designed to obscure the reality that divisions in behaviour are manifestations of mind, not body. Obsession with body identity and group judgement is a means to divert attention from the real source of behaviour – mind and perception. Conflict sown by the Woke both within themselves and with their target groups are Wetiko providing lunch for itself through still more agents of the division, chaos, and fear on which it feeds. The Cult is seeking to assimilate the entirety of humanity and all children and young people into the Wetiko frequency by manipulating them into states of fear and despair. Witness all the suicide and psychological unravelling since the spring of 2020. Wetiko psychopaths want to impose a state of unquestioning obedience to authority which is no more than a conduit for Wetiko to enforce its will and assimilate humanity into itself. It needs us to believe that resistance is futile when it fears resistance and even more so the game-changing non-cooperation with its impositions. It can use violent resistance for its benefit. Violent impositions and violent resistance are *both* Wetiko. The Power of Love with its Power of No will sweep Wetiko from our world. Wetiko and its Cult know that. They just don't want us to know.

AI Wetiko

This brings me to AI or artificial intelligence and something else Wetikos don't want us to know. What is AI *really*? I know about computer code algorithms and AI that learns from data input. These, however, are more diversions, the expeditionary force, for the real AI that they want to connect to the human brain as promoted by Silicon Valley Wetikos like Kurzweil. What is this AI? It is the frequency of *Wetiko*, the frequency of the Archons. The connection of AI to the human brain is the connection of the Wetiko frequency to create a Wetiko hive mind and complete the job of assimilation. The hive mind is planned to be controlled from Israel and China which are both 100 percent owned by Wetiko Sabbatians. The assimilation process has been going on minute by minute in the 'smart' era which fused with the 'Covid' era. We are told that social media is scrambling the minds of the young and changing their personality. This is true, but what is social media? Look more deeply at how it works, how it creates divisions and conflict, the hostility and cruelty, the targeting of people until they are destroyed. That's Wetiko. Social media is manipulated to tune people to the Wetiko frequency with all the emotional exploitation tricks employed by platforms like Facebook and its Wetiko front man, Zuckerberg. Facebook's Instagram announced a new platform for children to overcome a legal bar on them using the main site. This is more Wetiko exploitation and manipulation of kids. Amnesty International likened the plan to foxes offering to guard the henhouse and said it was incompatible with human rights. Since when did Wetiko or Zuckerberg (I repeat myself) care about that? Would Brin and Page at Google, Wojcicki at YouTube, Bezos at Amazon and whoever the hell runs Twitter act as they do if they were not channelling Wetiko? Would those who are developing technologies for no other reason than human control? How about those designing and selling technologies to kill people and Big Pharma drug and 'vaccine' producers who know they will end or devastate lives? Quite a thought for these people to consider is that if you are Wetiko in a human life you are Wetiko on the 'other side' unless your frequency

changes and that can only change by a change of perception which becomes a change of behaviour. Where Gates is going does not bear thinking about although perhaps that's exactly where he wants to go. Either way, that's where he's going. His frequency will make it so.

The frequency lair

I have been saying for a long time that a big part of the addiction to smartphones and devices is that a frequency is coming off them that entraps the mind. People spend ages on their phones and sometimes even a minute or so after they put them down they pick them up again and it all repeats. 'Covid' lockdowns will have increased this addiction a million times for obvious reasons. Addictions to alcohol overindulgence and drugs are another way that Wetiko entraps consciousness to attach to its own. Both are symptoms of low-vibrational psychological distress which alcoholism and drug addiction further compound. Do we think it's really a coincidence that access to them is made so easy while potions that can take people into realms beyond the simulation are banned and illegal? I have explored smartphone addiction in other books, the scale is mind-blowing, and that level of addiction does not come without help. Tech companies that make these phones are Wetiko and they will have no qualms about destroying the minds of children. We are seeing again with these companies the Wetiko perceptual combination of psychopathic enforcers and weak and meek unquestioning compliance by the rank and file.

The global Smart Grid is the Wetiko Grid and it is crucial to complete the Cult endgame. The simulation is radiation and we are being deluged with technological radiation on a devastating scale. Wetiko frauds like Elon Musk serve Cult interests while occasionally criticising them to maintain his street-cred. 5G and other forms of Wi-Fi are being directed at the earth from space on a volume and scale that goes on increasing by the day. Elon Musk's (officially) SpaceX Starlink project is in the process of putting tens of thousands of satellites in low orbit to cover every inch of the planet with 5G and other Wi-Fi to create Kurzweil's global 'cloud' to which the

human mind is planned to be attached very soon. SpaceX has approval to operate 12,000 satellites with more than 1,300 launched at the time of writing and applications filed for *30,000* more. Other operators in the Wi-Fi, 5G, low-orbit satellite market include OneWeb (UK), Telesat (Canada), and AST & Science (US). Musk tells us that AI could be the end of humanity and then launches a company called Neuralink to connect the human brain to computers. Musk's (in theory) Tesla company is building electric cars and the driverless vehicles of the smart control grid. As frauds and bullshitters go Elon Musk in my opinion is Major League.

5G and technological radiation in general are destructive to human health, genetics and psychology and increasing the strength of artificial radiation underpins the five-sense perceptual bubbles which are themselves expressions of radiation or electromagnetism. Freedom activist John Whitehead was so right with his 'databit by databit, we are building our own electronic concentration camps'. The Smart Grid and 5G is a means to control the human mind and infuse perceptual information into The Field to influence anyone in sync with its frequency. You can change perception and behaviour en masse if you can manipulate the population into those levels of frequency and this is happening all around us today. The arrogance of Musk and his fellow Cult operatives knows no bounds in the way that we see with Gates. Musk's satellites are so many in number already they are changing the night sky when viewed from Earth. The astronomy community has complained about this and they have seen nothing yet. Some consequences of Musk's Wetiko hubris include: Radiation; visible pollution of the night sky; interference with astronomy and meteorology; ground and water pollution from intensive use of increasingly many spaceports; accumulating space debris; continual deorbiting and burning up of aging satellites, polluting the atmosphere with toxic dust and smoke; and ever-increasing likelihood of collisions. A collective public open letter of complaint to Musk said:

> We are writing to you … because SpaceX is in process of surrounding the Earth with a network of thousands of satellites whose very purpose is to irradiate every square inch of the

Earth. SpaceX, like everyone else, is treating the radiation as if it were not there. As if the mitochondria in our cells do not depend on electrons moving undisturbed from the food we digest to the oxygen we breathe.

As if our nervous systems and our hearts are not subject to radio frequency interference like any piece of electronic equipment. As if the cancer, diabetes, and heart disease that now afflict a majority of the Earth's population are not metabolic diseases that result from interference with our cellular machinery. As if insects everywhere, and the birds and animals that eat them, are not starving to death as a result.

People like Musk and Gates believe in their limitless Wetiko arrogance that they can do whatever they like to the world because they own it. Consequences for humanity are irrelevant. It's absolutely time that we stopped taking this shit from these self-styled masters of the Earth when you consider where this is going.

Why is the Cult so anti-human?

I hear this question often: Why would they do this when it will affect them, too? Ah, but will it? Who is this *them*? Forget their bodies. They are just vehicles for Wetiko consciousness. When you break it all down to the foundations we are looking at a state of severely distorted consciousness targeting another state of consciousness for assimilation. The rest is detail. The simulation is the fly-trap in which unique sensations of the five senses create a cycle of addiction called reincarnation. Renegade Minds see that everything which happens in our reality is a smaller version of the whole picture in line with the holographic principle. Addiction to the radiation of smart technology is a smaller version of addiction to the whole simulation. Connecting the body/brain to AI is taking that addiction on a giant step further to total ongoing control by assimilating human incarnate consciousness into Wetiko. I have watched during the 'Covid' hoax how many are becoming ever more profoundly attached to Wetiko's perceptual calling cards of aggressive response to any other point of view ('There is no other god but me'), psychopathic lack of compassion and empathy, and servile submission to the narrative and will of authority. Wetiko is the psychopaths *and* subservience to psychopaths. The Cult of Wetiko is

so anti-human because it is *not* human. It embarked on a mission to destroy human by targeting everything that it means to be human and to survive as human. 'Covid' is not the end, just a means to an end. The Cult with its Wetiko consciousness is seeking to change Earth systems, including the atmosphere, to suit them, not humans. The gathering bombardment of 5G alone from ground and space is dramatically changing The Field with which the five senses interact. There is so much more to come if we sit on our hands and hope it will all go away. It is not meant to go away. It is meant to get ever more extreme and we need to face that while we still can – just.

Carbon dioxide is the gas of life. Without that human is over. Kaput, gone, history. No natural world, no human. The Cult has created a cock and bull story about carbon dioxide and climate change to justify its reduction to the point where Gates and the ignoramus Biden 'climate chief' John Kerry want to suck it out of the atmosphere. Kerry wants to do this because his master Gates does. Wetikos have made the gas of life a demon with the usual support from the Wokers of Extinction Rebellion and similar organisations and the bewildered puppet-child that is Greta Thunberg who was put on the world stage by Klaus Schwab and the World Economic Forum. The name Extinction Rebellion is both ironic and as always Wetiko inversion. The gas that we need to survive must be reduced to save us from extinction. The most basic need of human is oxygen and we now have billions walking around in face nappies depriving body and brain of this essential requirement of human existence. More than that 5G at 60 gigahertz interacts with the oxygen molecule to reduce the amount of oxygen the body can absorb into the bloodstream. The obvious knock-on consequences of that for respiratory and cognitive problems and life itself need no further explanation. Psychopaths like Musk are assembling a global system of satellites to deluge the human atmosphere with this insanity. The man should be in jail. Here we have two most basic of human needs, oxygen and carbon dioxide, being dismantled.

Two others, water and food, are getting similar treatment with the United Nations Agendas 21 and 2030 – the Great Reset – planning to

centrally control all water and food supplies. People will not even own rain water that falls on their land. Food is affected at the most basic level by reducing carbon dioxide. We have genetic modification or GMO infiltrating the food chain on a mass scale, pesticides and herbicides polluting the air and destroying the soil. Freshwater fish that provide livelihoods for 60 million people and feed hundreds of millions worldwide are being 'pushed to the brink' according the conservationists while climate change is the only focus. Now we have Gates and Schwab wanting to dispense with current food sources all together and replace them with a synthetic version which the Wetiko Cult would control in terms of production and who eats and who doesn't. We have been on the Totalitarian Tiptoe to this for more than 60 years as food has become ever more processed and full of chemical shite to the point today when it's not natural food at all. As Dr Tom Cowan says: 'If it has a label don't eat it.' Bill Gates is now the biggest owner of farmland in the United States and he does nothing without an ulterior motive involving the Cult. Klaus Schwab wrote: 'To feed the world in the next 50 years we will need to produce as much food as was produced in the last 10,000 years … food security will only be achieved, however, if regulations on genetically modified foods are adapted to reflect the reality that gene editing offers a precise, efficient and safe method of improving crops.' Liar. People and the world are being targeted with aluminium through vaccines, chemtrails, food, drink cans, and endless other sources when aluminium has been linked to many health issues including dementia which is increasing year after year. Insects, bees and wildlife essential to the food chain are being deleted by pesticides, herbicides and radiation which 5G is dramatically increasing with 6G and 7G to come. The pollinating bee population is being devastated while wildlife including birds, dolphins and whales are having their natural radar blocked by the effects of ever-increasing radiation. In the summer windscreens used to be splattered with insects so numerous were they. It doesn't happen now. Where have they gone?

Synthetic everything

The Cult is introducing genetically-modified versions of trees, plants and insects including a Gates-funded project to unleash hundreds of millions of genetically-modified, lab-altered and patented male mosquitoes to mate with wild mosquitoes and induce genetic flaws that cause them to die out. Clinically-insane Gates-funded Japanese researchers have developed mosquitos that spread vaccine and are dubbed 'flying vaccinators'. Gates is funding the modification of weather patterns in part to sell the myth that this is caused by carbon dioxide and he's funding geoengineering of the skies to change the atmosphere. Some of this came to light with the Gates-backed plan to release tonnes of chalk into the atmosphere to 'deflect the Sun and cool the planet'. Funny how they do this while the heating effect of the Sun is not factored into climate projections focussed on carbon dioxide. The reason is that they want to reduce carbon dioxide (so don't mention the Sun), but at the same time they do want to reduce the impact of the Sun which is so essential to human life and health. I have mentioned the sun-cholesterol-vitamin D connection as they demonise the Sun with warnings about skin cancer (caused by the chemicals in sun cream they tell you to splash on). They come from the other end of the process with statin drugs to reduce cholesterol that turns sunlight into vitamin D. A lack of vitamin D leads to a long list of health effects and how vitamin D levels must have fallen with people confined to their homes over 'Covid'. Gates is funding other forms of geoengineering and most importantly chemtrails which are dropping heavy metals, aluminium and self-replicating nanotechnology onto the Earth which is killing the natural world. See *Everything You Need To Know, But Have Never Been Told* for the detailed background to this.

Every human system is being targeted for deletion by a force that's not human. The Wetiko Cult has embarked on the process of transforming the human body from biological to synthetic biological as I have explained. Biological is being replaced by the artificial and synthetic – Archontic 'countermimicry' – right across human society. The plan eventually is to dispense with the human body altogether

and absorb human consciousness – which it wouldn't really be by then – into cyberspace (the simulation which is Wetiko/Yaldabaoth). Preparations for that are already happening if people would care to look. The alternative media rightly warns about globalism and 'the globalists', but this is far bigger than that and represents the end of the human race as we know it. The 'bad copy' of prime reality that Gnostics describe was a bad copy of harmony, wonder and beauty to start with before Wetiko/Yaldabaoth set out to change the simulated 'copy' into something very different. The process was slow to start with. Entrapped humans in the simulation timeline were not technologically aware and they had to be brought up to intellectual speed while being suppressed spiritually to the point where they could build their own prison while having no idea they were doing so. We have now reached that stage where technological intellect has the potential to destroy us and that's why events are moving so fast. Central American shaman Don Juan Matus said:

> Think for a moment, and tell me how you would explain the contradictions between the intelligence of man the engineer and the stupidity of his systems of belief, or the stupidity of his contradictory behaviour. Sorcerers believe that the predators have given us our systems of beliefs, our ideas of good and evil; our social mores. They are the ones who set up our dreams of success or failure. They have given us covetousness, greed, and cowardice. It is the predator who makes us complacent, routinary, and egomaniacal.
>
> In order to keep us obedient and meek and weak, the predators engaged themselves in a stupendous manoeuvre – stupendous, of course, from the point of view of a fighting strategist; a horrendous manoeuvre from the point of those who suffer it. They gave us their mind. The predators' mind is baroque, contradictory, morose, filled with the fear of being discovered any minute now.

For 'predators' see Wetiko, Archons, Yaldabaoth, Jinn, and all the other versions of the same phenomenon in cultures and religions all over the world. The theme is always the same because it's true and it's real. We have reached the point where we have to deal with it. The question is – how?

Don't fight – walk away

I thought I'd use a controversial subheading to get things moving in terms of our response to global fascism. What do you mean 'don't fight'? What do you mean 'walk away'? We've got to fight. We can't walk away. Well, it depends what we mean by fight and walk away. If fighting means physical combat we are playing Wetiko's game and falling for its trap. It wants us to get angry, aggressive, and direct hate and hostility at the enemy we think we must fight. Every war, every battle, every conflict, has been fought with Wetiko leading both sides. It's what it does. Wetiko wants a fight, anywhere, any place. Just hit me, son, so I can hit you back. Wetiko hits Wetiko and Wetiko hits Wetiko in return. I am very forthright as you can see in exposing Wetikos of the Cult, but I don't hate them. I refuse to hate them. It's what they want. What you hate you become. What you *fight* you become. Wokers, 'anti-haters' and 'anti-fascists' prove this every time they reach for their keyboards or don their balaclavas. By walk away I mean to disengage from Wetiko which includes ceasing to cooperate with its tyranny. Paul Levy says of Wetiko:

> The way to 'defeat' evil is not to try to destroy it (for then, in playing evil's game, we have already lost), but rather, to find the invulnerable place within ourselves where evil is unable to vanquish us – this is to truly 'win' our battle with evil.

Wetiko is everywhere in human society and it's been on steroids since the 'Covid' hoax. Every shouting match over wearing masks has Wetiko wearing a mask and Wetiko not wearing one. It's an electrical circuit of push and resist, push and resist, with Wetiko pushing *and* resisting. Each polarity is Wetiko empowering itself. Dictionary definitions of 'resist' include 'opposing, refusing to accept or comply with' and the word to focus on is 'opposing'. What form does this take – setting police cars alight or 'refusing to accept or comply with'? The former is Wetiko opposing Wetiko while the other points the way forward. This is the difference between those aggressively demanding that government fascism must be obeyed who stand in stark contrast to the great majority of Pushbackers. We saw this clearly with a march by thousands of Pushbackers against lockdown in London followed days later by a Woker-hijacked

protest in Bristol in which police cars were set on fire. Masks were virtually absent in London and widespread in Bristol. Wetiko wants lockdown on every level of society and infuses its aggression to police it through its unknowing stooges. Lockdown protesters are the ones with the smiling faces and the hugs, The two blatantly obvious states of being – getting more obvious by the day – are the result of Wokers and their like becoming ever more influenced by the simulation Field of Wetiko and Pushbackers ever more influenced by The Field of a far higher vibration beyond the simulation. Wetiko can't invade the heart which is where most lockdown opponents are coming from. It's the heart that allows them to see through the lies to the truth in ways I will be highlighting.

Renegade Minds know that calmness is the place from which wisdom comes. You won't find wisdom in a hissing fit and wisdom is what we need in abundance right now. Calmness is not weakness – you don't have to scream at the top of your voice to be strong. Calmness is indeed a sign of strength. 'No' means I'm not doing it. *NOOOO!!!* doesn't mean you're not doing it even more. Volume does not advance 'No – I'm not doing it'. You are just not doing it. Wetiko possessed and influenced don't know how to deal with that. Wetiko wants a fight and we should not give it one. What it needs more than anything is our *cooperation* and we should not give that either. Mass rallies and marches are great in that they are a visual representation of feeling, but if it ends there they are irrelevant. You demand that Wetikos act differently? Well, they're not going to are they? They are Wetikos. We don't need to waste our time demanding that something doesn't happen when that will make no difference. We need to delete the means that *allows* it to happen. This, invariably, is our cooperation. You can demand a child stop firing a peashooter at the dog or you can refuse to buy the peashooter. If you provide the means you are cooperating with the dog being smacked on the nose with a pea. How can the authorities enforce mask-wearing if millions in a country refuse? What if the 74 million Pushbackers that voted for Trump in 2020 refused to wear masks, close their businesses or stay in their homes. It would be unenforceable. The

few control the many through the compliance of the many and that's always been the dynamic be it 'Covid' regulations or the Roman Empire. I know people can find it intimidating to say no to authority or stand out in a crowd for being the only one with a face on display; but it has to be done or it's over. I hope I've made clear in this book that where this is going will be far more intimidating than standing up now and saying 'No' – I will not cooperate with my own enslavement and that of my children. There might be consequences for some initially, although not so if enough do the same. The question that must be addressed is what is going to happen if we don't? It is time to be strong and unyieldingly so. No means no. Not here and there, but *everywhere* and *always*. I have refused to wear a mask and obey all the other nonsense. I will not comply with tyranny. I repeat: Fascism is not imposed by fascists – there are never enough of them. Fascism is imposed by the population acquiescing to fascism. *I will not do it*. I will die first, or my body will. Living meekly under fascism is a form of death anyway, the death of the spirit that Martin Luther King described.

Making things happen

We must not despair. This is not over till it's over and it's far from that. The 'fat lady' must refuse to sing. The longer the 'Covid' hoax has dragged on and impacted on more lives we have seen an awakening of phenomenal numbers of people worldwide to the realisation that what they have believed all their lives is not how the world really is. Research published by the system-serving University of Bristol and King's College London in February, 2021, concluded: 'One in every 11 people in Britain say they trust David Icke's take on the coronavirus pandemic.' It will be more by now and we have gathering numbers to build on. We must urgently progress from seeing the scam to ceasing to cooperate with it. Prominent German lawyer Reiner Fuellmich, also licenced to practice law in America, is doing a magnificent job taking the legal route to bring the psychopaths to justice through a second Nuremberg tribunal for crimes against humanity. Fuellmich has an impressive record of

beating the elite in court and he formed the German Corona Investigative Committee to pursue civil charges against the main perpetrators with a view to triggering criminal charges. Most importantly he has grasped the foundation of the hoax – the PCR test not testing for the 'virus' – and Christian Drosten is therefore on his charge sheet along with Gates frontman Tedros at the World Health Organization. Major players must be not be allowed to inflict their horrors on the human race without being brought to book. A life sentence must follow for Bill Gates and the rest of them. A group of researchers has also indicted the government of Norway for crimes against humanity with copies sent to the police and the International Criminal Court. The lawsuit cites participation in an internationally-planned false pandemic and violation of international law and human rights, the European Commission's definition of human rights by coercive rules, Nuremberg and Hague rules on fundamental human rights, and the Norwegian constitution. We must take the initiative from hereon and not just complain, protest and react.

There are practical ways to support vital mass non-cooperation. Organising in numbers is one. Lockdown marches in London in the spring in 2021 were mass non-cooperation that the authorities could not stop. There were too many people. Hundreds of thousands walked the London streets in the centre of the road for mile after mile while the Face-Nappies could only look on. They were determined, but calm, and just *did it* with no histrionics and lots of smiles. The police were impotent. Others are organising group shopping without masks for mutual support and imagine if that was happening all over. Policing it would be impossible. If the store refuses to serve people in these circumstances they would be faced with a long line of trolleys full of goods standing on their own and everything would have to be returned to the shelves. How would they cope with that if it kept happening? I am talking here about moving on from complaining to being pro-active; from watching things happen to making things happen. I include in this our relationship with the police. The behaviour of many Face-Nappies

has been disgraceful and anyone who thinks they would never find concentration camp guards in the 'enlightened' modern era have had that myth busted big-time. The period and setting may change – Wetikos never do. I watched film footage from a London march in which a police thug viciously kicked a protestor on the floor who had done nothing. His fellow Face-Nappies stood in a ring protecting him. What he did was a criminal assault and with a crowd far outnumbering the police this can no longer be allowed to happen unchallenged. I get it when people chant 'shame on you' in these circumstances, but that is no longer enough. They *have* no shame those who do this. Crowds needs to start making a citizen's arrest of the police who commit criminal offences and brutally attack innocent people and defenceless women. A citizen's arrest can be made under section 24A of the UK Police and Criminal Evidence (PACE) Act of 1984 and you will find something similar in other countries. I prefer to call it a Common Law arrest rather than citizen's for reasons I will come to shortly. Anyone can arrest a person committing an indictable offence or if they have reasonable grounds to suspect they are committing an indictable offence. On both counts the attack by the police thug would have fallen into this category. A citizen's arrest can be made to stop someone:

- Causing physical injury to himself or any other person
- Suffering physical injury
- Causing loss of or damage to property
- Making off before a constable can assume responsibility for him

A citizen's arrest may also be made to prevent a breach of the peace under Common Law and if they believe a breach of the peace will happen or anything related to harm likely to be done or already done in their presence. This is the way to go I think – the Common Law version. If police know that the crowd and members of the public will no longer be standing and watching while they commit

their thuggery and crimes they will think twice about acting like Brownshirts and Blackshirts.

Common Law – common sense

Mention of Common Law is very important. Most people think the law is the law as in one law. This is not the case. There are two bodies of law, Common Law and Statute Law, and they are not the same. Common Law is founded on the simple premise of do no harm. It does not recognise victimless crimes in which no harm is done while Statute Law does. There is a Statute Law against almost everything. So what is Statute Law? Amazingly it's the law of the *sea* that was brought ashore by the Cult to override the law of the land which is Common Law. They had no right to do this and as always they did it anyway. They had to. They could not impose their will on the people through Common Law which only applies to do no harm. How could you stitch up the fine detail of people's lives with that? Instead they took the law of the sea, or Admiralty Law, and applied it to the population. Statute Law refers to all the laws spewing out of governments and their agencies including all the fascist laws and regulations relating to 'Covid'. The key point to make is that Statute Law is *contract law*. It only applies between *contracting* corporations. Most police officers don't even know this. They have to be kept in the dark, too. Long ago when merchants and their sailing ships began to trade with different countries a contractual law was developed called Admiralty Law and other names. Again it only applied to *contracts* agreed between *corporate* entities. If there is no agreed contract the law of the sea had no jurisdiction *and that still applies to its new alias of Statute Law*. The problem for the Cult when the law of the sea was brought ashore was an obvious one. People were not corporations and neither were government entities. To overcome the latter they made governments and all associated organisations corporations. All the institutions are *private corporations* and I mean governments and their agencies, local councils, police, courts, military, US states, the whole lot. Go to the

Dun and Bradstreet corporate listings website for confirmation that they are all corporations. You are arrested by a private corporation called the police by someone who is really a private security guard and they take you to court which is another private corporation. Neither have jurisdiction over you unless you consent and *contract* with them. This is why you hear the mantra about law enforcement policing by *consent* of the people. In truth the people 'consent' only in theory through monumental trickery.

Okay, the Cult overcame the corporate law problem by making governments and institutions corporate entities; but what about people? They are not corporations are they? Ah ... well in a sense, and *only* a sense, they are. Not people exactly – the illusion of people. The Cult creates a corporation in the name of everyone at the time that their birth certificate is issued. Note birth/ *berth* certificate and when you go to court under the law of the sea on land you stand in a *dock*. These are throwbacks to the origin. My Common Law name is David Vaughan Icke. The name of the corporation created by the government when I was born is called Mr David Vaughan Icke usually written in capitals as MR DAVID VAUGHAN ICKE. That is not me, the living, breathing man. It is a fictitious corporate entity. The trick is to make you think that David Vaughan Icke and MR DAVID VAUGHAN ICKE are the same thing. *They are not*. When police charge you and take you to court they are prosecuting the corporate entity and not the living, breathing, man or woman. They have to trick you into identifying as the corporate entity and contracting with them. Otherwise they have no jurisdiction. They do this through a language known as legalese. Lawful and legal are not the same either. Lawful relates to Common Law and legal relates to Statute Law. Legalese is the language of Statue Law which uses terms that mean one thing to the public and another in legalese. Notice that when a police officer tells someone why they are being charged he or she will say at the end: 'Do you understand?' To the public that means 'Do you comprehend?' In legalese it means 'Do you stand under me?' Do you stand under my authority? If you say

yes to the question you are unknowingly agreeing to give them jurisdiction over you in a contract between two corporate entities.

This is a confidence trick in every way. Contracts have to be agreed between informed parties and if you don't know that David Vaughan Icke is agreeing to be the corporation MR DAVID VAUGHAN ICKE you cannot knowingly agree to contract. They are deceiving you and another way they do this is to ask for proof of identity. You usually show them a driving licence or other document on which your corporate name is written. In doing so you are accepting that you are that corporate entity when you are not. Referring to yourself as a 'person' or 'citizen' is also identifying with your corporate fiction which is why I made the Common Law point about the citizen's arrest. If you are approached by a police officer you identify yourself immediately as a living, breathing, man or woman and say 'I do not consent, I do not contract with you and I do not understand' or stand under their authority. I have a Common Law birth certificate as a living man and these are available at no charge from commonlawcourt.com. Businesses registered under the Statute Law system means that its laws apply. There are, however, ways to run a business under Common Law. Remember all 'Covid' laws and regulations are Statute Law – the law of *contracts* and you do not have to contract. This doesn't mean that you can kill someone and get away with it. Common Law says do no harm and that applies to physical harm, financial harm etc. Police are employees of private corporations and there needs to be a new system of non-corporate Common Law constables operating outside the Statute Law system. If you go to davidicke.com and put Common Law into the search engine you will find videos that explain Common Law in much greater detail. It is definitely a road we should walk.

With all my heart

I have heard people say that we are in a spiritual war. I don't like the term 'war' with its Wetiko dynamic, but I know what they mean. Sweep aside all the bodily forms and we are in a situation in which two states of consciousness are seeking very different realities.

Wetiko wants upheaval, chaos, fear, suffering, conflict and control. The other wants love, peace, harmony, fairness and freedom. That's where we are. We should not fall for the idea that Wetiko is all-powerful and there's nothing we can do. Wetiko is not all-powerful. It's a joke, pathetic. It doesn't have to be, but it has made that choice for now. A handful of times over the years when I have felt the presence of its frequency I have allowed it to attach briefly so I could consciously observe its nature. The experience is not pleasant, the energy is heavy and dark, but the ease with which you can kick it back out the door shows that its real power is in persuading us that it has power. It's all a con. Wetiko is a con. It's a trickster and not a power that can control us if we unleash our own. The con is founded on manipulating humanity to give its power to Wetiko which recycles it back to present the illusion that it has power when its power is *ours* that we gave away. This happens on an energetic level and plays out in the world of the seen as humanity giving its power to Wetiko authority which uses that power to control the population when the power is only the power the population has handed over. How could it be any other way for billions to be controlled by a relative few? I have had experiences with people possessed by Wetiko and again you can kick its arse if you do it with an open heart. Oh yes – the *heart* which can transform the world of perceived 'matter'.

We are receiver-transmitters and processors of information, but what information and where from? Information is processed into perception in three main areas – the brain, the heart and the belly. These relate to thinking, knowing, and emotion. Wetiko wants us to be head and belly people which means we think within the confines of the Matrix simulation and low-vibrational emotional reaction scrambles balance and perception. A few minutes on social media and you see how emotion is the dominant force. Woke is all emotion and is therefore thought-free and fact-free. Our heart is something different. It *knows* while the head *thinks* and has to try to work it out because it doesn't know. The human energy field has seven prime vortexes which connect us with wider reality (Fig 23). Chakra means

'wheels of light' in the Sanskrit language of ancient India. The main ones are: The crown chakra on top of the head; brow (or 'third eye') chakra in the centre of the forehead; throat chakra; heart chakra in the centre of the chest; solar plexus chakra below the sternum; sacral chakra beneath the navel; and base chakra at the bottom of the spine. Each one has a particular function or functions. We feel anxiety and nervousness in the belly where the sacral chakra is located and this processes emotion that can affect the colon to give people 'the shits' or make them 'shit scared' when they are nervous. Chakras all play an important role, but the Mr and Mrs Big is the heart chakra which sits at the centre of the seven, above the chakras that connect us to the 'physical' and below those that connect with higher realms (or at least should). Here in the heart chakra we feel love, empathy and compassion – 'My heart goes out to you'. Those with closed hearts become literally 'heart-less' in their attitudes and behaviour (see Bill Gates). Native Americans portrayed Wetiko with what Paul Levy calls a 'frigid, icy heart, devoid of mercy' (see Bill Gates).

Figure 23: The chakra system which interpenetrates the human energy field. The heart chakra is the governor – or should be.

Wetiko trembles at the thought of heart energy which it cannot infiltrate. The frequency is too high. What it seeks to do instead is close the heart chakra vortex to block its perceptual and energetic influence. Psychopaths have 'hearts of stone' and emotionally-damaged people have 'heartache' and 'broken hearts'. The astonishing amount of heart disease is related to heart chakra

disruption with its fundamental connection to the 'physical' heart. Dr Tom Cowan has written an outstanding book challenging the belief that the heart is a pump and making the connection between the 'physical' and spiritual heart. Rudolph Steiner who was way ahead of his time said the same about the fallacy that the heart is a pump. *What*? The heart is not a pump? That's crazy, right? Everybody knows that. Read Cowan's *Human Heart, Cosmic Heart* and you will realise that the very idea of the heart as a pump is ridiculous when you see the evidence. How does blood in the feet so far from the heart get pumped horizontally up the body by the heart?? Cowan explains in the book the real reason why blood moves as it does. Our 'physical' heart is used to symbolise love when the source is really the heart vortex or spiritual heart which is our most powerful energetic connection to 'out there' expanded consciousness. That's why we feel *knowing* – intuitive knowing – in the centre of the chest. Knowing doesn't come from a process of thoughts leading to a conclusion. It is there in an instant all in one go. Our heart knows because of its connection to levels of awareness that *do* know. This is the meaning and source of intuition – intuitive *knowing*.

For the last more than 30 years of uncovering the global game and the nature of reality my heart has been my constant antenna for truth and accuracy. An American intelligence insider once said that I had quoted a disinformer in one of my books and yet I had only quoted the part that was true. He asked: 'How do you do that?' By using my heart antenna was the answer and anyone can do it. Heart-centred is how we are meant to be. With a closed heart chakra we withdraw into a closed mind and the bubble of five-sense reality. If you take a moment to focus your attention on the centre of your chest, picture a spinning wheel of light and see it opening and expanding. You will feel it happening, too, and perceptions of the heart like joy and love as the heart impacts on the mind as they interact. The more the chakra opens the more you will feel expressions of heart consciousness and as the process continues, and becomes part of you, insights and knowings will follow. An open

heart is connected to that level of awareness that knows all is *One*. You will see from its perspective that the fault-lines that divide us are only illusions to control us. An open heart does not process the illusions of race, creed and sexuality except as brief experiences for a consciousness that is all. Our heart does not see division, only unity (Figs 24 and 25). There's something else, too. Our hearts love to laugh. Mark Twain's quote that says 'The human race has one really effective weapon, and that is laughter' is really a reference to the heart which loves to laugh with the joy of knowing the true nature of infinite reality and that all the madness of human society is an illusion of the mind. Twain also said: 'Against the assault of laughter nothing can stand.' This is so true of Wetiko and the Cult. Their insecurity demands that they be taken seriously and their power and authority acknowledged and feared. We should do nothing of the sort. We should not get aggressive or fearful which their insecurity so desires. We should laugh in their face. Even in their no-face as police come over in their face-nappies and expect to be taken seriously. They don't take themselves seriously looking like that so why should we? Laugh in the face of intimidation. Laugh in the face of tyranny. You will see by its reaction that you have pressed all of its buttons. Wetiko does not know what to do in the face of laughter or when its targets refuse to concede their joy to fear. We have seen many examples during the 'Covid' hoax when people have expressed their energetic power and the string puppets of Wetiko retreat with their tail limp between their knees. Laugh – the world is bloody mad after all and if it's a choice between laughter and tears I know which way I'm going.

Figure 24: Head consciousness without the heart sees division and everything apart from everything else.

Figure 25: Heart consciousness sees everything as One.

'Vaccines' and the soul

The foundation of Wetiko/Archon control of humans is the separation of incarnate five-sense mind from the infinite 'I' and closing the heart chakra where the True 'I' lives during a human life. The goal has been to achieve complete separation in both cases. I was interested therefore to read an account by a French energetic healer of what she said she experienced with a patient who had been given the 'Covid' vaccine. Genuine energy healers can sense information and consciousness fields at different levels of being which are referred to as 'subtle bodies'. She described treating the patient who later returned after having, without the healer's knowledge, two doses of the 'Covid vaccine'. The healer said:

I noticed immediately the change, very heavy energy emanating from [the] subtle bodies. The scariest thing was when I was working on the heart chakra, I connected with her soul: it was detached from the physical body, it had no contact and it was, as if it was floating in a state of total confusion: a damage to the consciousness that loses contact with the physical body, i.e. with our biological machine, there is no longer any communication between them.

I continued the treatment by sending light to the heart chakra, the soul of the person, but it seemed that the soul could no longer receive any light, frequency or energy. It was a very powerful experience for me. Then I understood that this substance is indeed used to detach consciousness so that this consciousness can no longer interact through this body that it possesses in life, where there is no longer any contact, no frequency, no light, no more energetic balance or mind.

This would create a human that is rudderless and at the extreme almost zombie-like operating with a fractional state of consciousness at the mercy of Wetiko. I was especially intrigued by what the healer said in the light of the prediction by the highly-informed Rudolf Steiner more than a hundred years ago. He said:

In the future, we will eliminate the soul with medicine. Under the pretext of a 'healthy point of view', there will be a vaccine by which the human body will be treated as soon as possible directly at birth, so that the human being cannot develop the thought of the existence of soul and Spirit. To materialistic doctors will be entrusted the task of removing the soul of humanity.

As today, people are vaccinated against this disease or that disease, so in the future, children will be vaccinated with a substance that can be produced precisely in such a way that people, thanks to this vaccination, will be immune to being subjected to the 'madness' of spiritual life. He would be extremely smart, but he would not develop a conscience, and that is the true goal of some materialistic circles.

Steiner said the vaccine would detach the physical body from the etheric body (subtle bodies) and 'once the etheric body is detached the relationship between the universe and the etheric body would become extremely unstable, and man would become an automaton'. He said 'the physical body of man must be polished on this Earth by spiritual will – so the vaccine becomes a kind of arymanique (Wetiko) force' and 'man can no longer get rid of a given materialistic feeling'. Humans would then, he said, become 'materialistic of constitution and can no longer rise to the spiritual'. I have been writing for years about DNA being a receiver-transmitter of information that connects us to other levels of reality and these 'vaccines' changing DNA can be likened to changing an antenna and what it can transmit and receive. Such a disconnection would clearly lead to changes in personality and perception. Steiner further predicted the arrival of AI. Big Pharma 'Covid vaccine' makers, expressions of Wetiko, are testing their DNA-manipulating evil on children as I write with a view to giving the 'vaccine' to babies. If it's a soul-body disconnector – and I say that it is or can be – every child would be disconnected from 'soul' at birth and the 'vaccine' would create a closed system in which spiritual guidance from the greater self would play no part. This has been the ambition of Wetiko all

along. A Pentagon video from 2005 was leaked of a presentation explaining the development of vaccines to change behaviour by their effect on the brain. Those that believe this is not happening with the 'Covid' genetically-modifying procedure masquerading as a 'vaccine' should make an urgent appointment with Naivety Anonymous. Klaus Schwab wrote in 2018:

> Neurotechnologies enable us to better influence consciousness and thought and to understand many activities of the brain. They include decoding what we are thinking in fine levels of detail through new chemicals and interventions that can influence our brains to correct for errors or enhance functionality.

The plan is clear and only the heart can stop it. With every heart that opens, every mind that awakens, Wetiko is weakened. Heart and love are far more powerful than head and hate and so nothing like a majority is needed to turn this around.

Beyond the Phantom

Our heart is the prime target of Wetiko and so it must be the answer to Wetiko. We *are* our heart which is part of one heart, the infinite heart. Our heart is where the true self lives in a human life behind firewalls of five-sense illusion when an imposter takes its place – *Phantom Self*; but our heart waits patiently to be set free any time we choose to see beyond the Phantom, beyond Wetiko. A Wetikoed Phantom Self can wreak mass death and destruction while the love of forever is locked away in its heart. The time is here to unleash its power and let it sweep away the fear and despair that is Wetiko. Heart consciousness does not seek manipulated, censored, advantage for its belief or religion, its activism and desires. As an expression of the One it treats all as One with the same rights to freedom and opinion. Our heart demands fairness for itself no more than for others. From this unity of heart we can come together in mutual support and transform this Wetikoed world into what reality is meant to be – a place of love, joy, happiness, fairness, justice and freedom. Wetiko has another agenda and that's why the world is as

it is, but enough of this nonsense. Wetiko can't stay where hearts are open and it works so hard to keep them closed. Fear is its currency and its food source and love in its true sense has no fear. Why would love have fear when it knows it is *All That Is, Has Been, And Ever Can Be* on an eternal exploration of all possibility? Love in this true sense is not the physical attraction that passes for love. This can be an expression of it, yes, but Infinite Love, a love without condition, goes far deeper to the core of all being. It *is* the core of all being. Infinite realty was born from love beyond the illusions of the simulation. Love infinitely expressed is the knowing that all is One and the swiftly-passing experience of separation is a temporary hallucination. You cannot disconnect from Oneness; you can only *perceive* that you have and withdraw from its influence. This is the most important of all perception trickery by the mind parasite that is Wetiko and the foundation of all its potential for manipulation.

If we open our hearts, open the sluice gates of the mind, and redefine self-identity amazing things start to happen. Consciousness expands or contracts in accordance with self-identity. When true self is recognised as infinite awareness and label self – Phantom Self – is seen as only a series of brief experiences life is transformed. Consciousness expands to the extent that self-identity expands and everything changes. You see unity, not division, the picture, not the pixels. From this we can play the long game. No more is an experience something in and of itself, but a fleeting moment in the eternity of forever. Suddenly people in uniform and dark suits are no longer intimidating. Doing what your heart knows to be right is no longer intimidating and consequences for those actions take on the same nature of a brief experience that passes in the blink of an infinite eye. Intimidation is all in the mind. Beyond the mind there is no intimidation.

An open heart does not consider consequences for what it knows to be right. To do so would be to consider not doing what it knows to be right and for a heart in its power that is never an option. The Renegade Mind is really the Renegade Heart. Consideration of consequences will always provide a getaway car for the mind and

the heart doesn't want one. What is right in the light of what we face today is to stop cooperating with Wetiko in all its forms and to do it without fear or compromise. You cannot compromise with tyranny when tyranny always demands more until it has everything. Life is your perception and you are your destiny. Change your perception and you change your life. Change collective perception and we change the world.

Come on people … One human family, One heart, One goal … *FREEEEEEDOM*!

We must settle for nothing less.

Postscript

The big scare story as the book goes to press is the 'Indian' variant and the world is being deluged with propaganda about the 'Covid catastrophe' in India which mirrors in its lies and misrepresentations what happened in Italy before the first lockdown in 2020.

The *New York Post* published a picture of someone who had 'collapsed in the street from Covid' in India in April, 2021, which was actually taken during a gas leak in May, 2020. Same old, same old. Media articles in mid-February were asking why India had been so untouched by 'Covid' and then as their vaccine rollout gathered pace the alleged 'cases' began to rapidly increase. Indian 'Covid vaccine' maker Bharat Biotech was funded into existence by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (the pair announced their divorce in May, 2021, which is a pity because they so deserve each other). The Indian 'Covid crisis' was ramped up by the media to terrify the world and prepare people for submission to still more restrictions. The scam that worked the first time was being repeated only with far more people seeing through the deceit. Davidicke.com and Ickonic.com have sought to tell the true story of what is happening by talking to people living through the Indian nightmare which has nothing to do with 'Covid'. We posted a letter from 'Alisha' in Pune who told a very different story to government and media mendacity. She said scenes of dying people and overwhelmed hospitals were designed to hide what was really happening – genocide and starvation. Alisha said that millions had already died of starvation during the ongoing lockdowns while government and media were lying and making it look like the 'virus':

Restaurants, shops, gyms, theatres, basically everything is shut. The cities are ghost towns. Even so-called 'essential' businesses are only open till 11am in the morning. You basically have just an hour to buy food and then your time is up.

Inter-state travel and even inter-district travel is banned. The cops wait at all major crossroads to question why you are traveling outdoors or to fine you if you are not wearing a mask.

The medical community here is also complicit in genocide, lying about hospitals being full and turning away people with genuine illnesses, who need immediate care. They have even created a shortage of oxygen cylinders.

This is the classic Cult modus operandi played out in every country. Alisha said that people who would not have a PCR test not testing for the 'virus' were being denied hospital treatment. She said the people hit hardest were migrant workers and those in rural areas. Most businesses employed migrant workers and with everything closed there were no jobs, no income and no food. As a result millions were dying of starvation or malnutrition. All this was happening under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, a 100-percent asset of the Cult, and it emphasises yet again the scale of pure anti-human evil we are dealing with. Australia banned its people from returning home from India with penalties for trying to do so of up to five years in jail and a fine of £37,000. The manufactured 'Covid' crisis in India was being prepared to justify further fascism in the West. Obvious connections could be seen between the Indian 'vaccine' programme and increased 'cases' and this became a common theme. The Seychelles, the most per capita 'Covid vaccinated' population in the world, went back into lockdown after a 'surge of cases'.

Long ago the truly evil Monsanto agricultural biotechnology corporation with its big connections to Bill Gates devastated Indian farming with genetically-modified crops. Human rights activist Gurcharan Singh highlighted the efforts by the Indian government to complete the job by destroying the food supply to hundreds of millions with 'Covid' lockdowns. He said that 415 million people at the bottom of the disgusting caste system (still going whatever they say) were below the poverty line and struggled to feed themselves every year. Now the government was imposing lockdown at just the

time to destroy the harvest. This deliberate policy was leading to mass starvation. People may reel back at the suggestion that a government would do that, but Wetiko-controlled 'leaders' are capable of any level of evil. In fact what is described in India is in the process of being instigated worldwide. The food chain and food supply are being targeted at every level to cause world hunger and thus control. Bill Gates is not the biggest owner of farmland in America for no reason and destroying access to food aids both the depopulation agenda and the plan for synthetic 'food' already being funded into existence by Gates. Add to this the coming hyper-inflation from the suicidal creation of fake 'money' in response to 'Covid' and the breakdown of container shipping systems and you have a cocktail that can only lead one way and is meant to. The Cult plan is to crash the entire system to 'build back better' with the Great Reset.

'Vaccine' transmission

Reports from all over the world continue to emerge of women suffering menstrual and fertility problems after having the fake 'vaccine' and of the non-'vaccinated' having similar problems when interacting with the 'vaccinated'. There are far too many for 'coincidence' to be credible. We've had menopausal women getting periods, others having periods stop or not stopping for weeks, passing clots, sometimes the lining of the uterus, breast irregularities, and miscarriages (which increased by 400 percent in parts of the United States). Non-'vaccinated' men and children have suffered blood clots and nose bleeding after interaction with the 'vaccinated'. Babies have died from the effects of breast milk from a 'vaccinated' mother. Awake doctors – the small minority – speculated on the cause of non-'vaccinated' suffering the same effects as the 'vaccinated'. Was it nanotechnology in the synthetic substance transmitting frequencies or was it a straight chemical bioweapon that was being transmitted between people? I am not saying that some kind of chemical transmission is not one possible answer, but the foundation of all that the Cult does is frequency and

this is fertile ground for understanding how transmission can happen. American doctor Carrie Madej, an internal medicine physician and osteopath, has been practicing for the last 20 years, teaching medical students, and she says attending different meetings where the agenda for humanity was discussed. Madej, who operates out of Georgia, did not dismiss other possible forms of transmission, but she focused on frequency in search of an explanation for transmission. She said the Moderna and Pfizer 'vaccines' contained nano-lipid particles as a key component. This was a brand new technology never before used on humanity. 'They're using a nanotechnology which is pretty much little tiny computer bits … nanobots or hydrogel.' Inside the 'vaccines' was 'this sci-fi kind of substance' which suppressed immune checkpoints to get into the cell. I referred to this earlier as the 'Trojan horse' technique that tricks the cell into opening a gateway for the self-replicating synthetic material and while the immune system is artificially suppressed the body has no defences. Madej said the substance served many purposes including an on-demand ability to 'deliver the payload' and using the nano 'computer bits' as biosensors in the body. 'It actually has the ability to accumulate data from your body, like your breathing, your respiration, thoughts, emotions, all kinds of things.'

She said the technology obviously has the ability to operate through Wi-Fi and transmit and receive energy, messages, frequencies or impulses. 'Just imagine you're getting this new substance in you and it can react to things all around you, the 5G, your smart device, your phones.' We had something completely foreign in the human body that had never been launched large scale at a time when we were seeing 5G going into schools and hospitals (plus the Musk satellites) and she believed the 'vaccine' transmission had something to do with this: '… if these people have this inside of them … it can act like an antenna and actually transmit it outwardly as well.' The synthetic substance produced its own voltage and so it could have that kind of effect. This fits with my own contention that the nano receiver-transmitters are designed to connect people to the

Smart Grid and break the receiver-transmitter connection to expanded consciousness. That would explain the French energy healer's experience of the disconnection of body from 'soul' with those who have had the 'vaccine'. The nanobots, self-replicating inside the body, would also transmit the synthetic frequency which could be picked up through close interaction by those who have not been 'vaccinated'. Madej speculated that perhaps it was 5G and increased levels of other radiation that was causing the symptoms directly although interestingly she said that non-'vaccinated' patients had shown improvement when they were away from the 'vaccinated' person they had interacted with. It must be remembered that you can control frequency and energy with your mind and you can consciously create energetic barriers or bubbles with the mind to stop damaging frequencies from penetrating your field. American paediatrician Dr Larry Palevsky said the 'vaccine' was not a 'vaccine' and was never designed to protect from a 'viral' infection. He called it 'a massive, brilliant propaganda of genocide' because they didn't have to inject everyone to get the result they wanted. He said the content of the jabs was able to infuse any material into the brain, heart, lungs, kidneys, liver, sperm and female productive system. 'This is genocide; this is a weapon of mass destruction.' At the same time American colleges were banning students from attending if they didn't have this life-changing and potentially life-ending 'vaccine'. Class action lawsuits must follow when the consequences of this college fascism come to light. As the book was going to press came reports about fertility effects on sperm in 'vaccinated' men which would absolutely fit with what I have been saying and hospitals continued to fill with 'vaccine' reactions. Another question is what about transmission via blood transfusions? The NHS has extended blood donation restrictions from seven days after a 'Covid vaccination' to 28 days after even a sore arm reaction.

I said in the spring of 2020 that the then touted 'Covid vaccine' would be ongoing each year like the flu jab. A year later Pfizer CEO, the appalling Albert Bourla, said people would 'likely' need a 'booster dose' of the 'vaccine' within 12 months of getting 'fully

vaccinated' and then a yearly shot. 'Variants will play a key role', he said confirming the point. Johnson & Johnson CEO Alex Gorsky also took time out from his 'vaccine' disaster to say that people may need to be vaccinated against 'Covid-19' each year. UK Health Secretary, the psychopath Matt Hancock, said additional 'boosters' would be available in the autumn of 2021. This is the trap of the 'vaccine passport'. The public will have to accept every last 'vaccine' they introduce, including for the fake 'variants', or it would cease to be valid. The only other way in some cases would be continuous testing with a test not testing for the 'virus' and what is on the swabs constantly pushed up your noise towards the brain every time?

'Vaccines' changing behaviour

I mentioned in the body of the book how I believed we would see gathering behaviour changes in the 'vaccinated' and I am already hearing such comments from the non-'vaccinated' describing behaviour changes in friends, loved ones and work colleagues. This will only increase as the self-replicating synthetic material and nanoparticles expand in body and brain. An article in the *Guardian* in 2016 detailed research at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville which developed a new method for controlling brain circuits associated with complex animal behaviour. The method, dubbed 'magnetogenetics', involves genetically-engineering a protein called ferritin, which stores and releases iron, to create a magnetised substance – 'Magneto' – that can activate specific groups of nerve cells from a distance. This is claimed to be an advance on other methods of brain activity manipulation known as optogenetics and chemogenetics (the Cult has been developing methods of brain control for a long time). The ferritin technique is said to be non-invasive and able to activate neurons 'rapidly and reversibly'. In other words, human thought and perception. The article said that earlier studies revealed how nerve cell proteins 'activated by heat and mechanical pressure can be genetically engineered so that they become sensitive to radio waves and magnetic fields, by attaching them to an iron-storing protein called ferritin, or to inorganic

paramagnetic particles'. Sensitive to radio waves and magnetic fields? You mean like 5G, 6G and 7G? This is the human-AI Smart Grid hive mind we are talking about. The *Guardian* article said:

> … the researchers injected Magneto into the striatum of freely behaving mice, a deep brain structure containing dopamine-producing neurons that are involved in reward and motivation, and then placed the animals into an apparatus split into magnetised and non-magnetised sections.
>
> Mice expressing Magneto spent far more time in the magnetised areas than mice that did not, because activation of the protein caused the striatal neurons expressing it to release dopamine, so that the mice found being in those areas rewarding. This shows that Magneto can remotely control the firing of neurons deep within the brain, and also control complex behaviours.

Make no mistake this basic methodology will be part of the 'Covid vaccine' cocktail and using magnetics to change brain function through electromagnetic field frequency activation. The Pentagon is developing a 'Covid vaccine' using ferritin. Magnetics would explain changes in behaviour and why videos are appearing across the Internet as I write showing how magnets stick to the skin at the point of the 'vaccine' shot. Once people take these 'vaccines' anything becomes possible in terms of brain function and illness which will be blamed on 'Covid-19' and 'variants'. Magnetic field manipulation would further explain why the non-'vaccinated' are reporting the same symptoms as the 'vaccinated' they interact with and why those symptoms are reported to decrease when not in their company. Interestingly 'Magneto', a 'mutant', is a character in the Marvel Comic *X-Men* stories with the ability to manipulate magnetic fields and he believes that mutants should fight back against their human oppressors by any means necessary. The character was born Erik Lehnsherr to a Jewish family in Germany.

Cult-controlled courts

The European Court of Human Rights opened the door for mandatory 'Covid-19 vaccines' across the continent when it ruled in a Czech Republic dispute over childhood immunisation that legally

enforced vaccination could be 'necessary in a democratic society'. The 17 judges decided that compulsory vaccinations did not breach human rights law. On the face of it the judgement was so inverted you gasp for air. If not having a vaccine infused into your body is not a human right then what is? Ah, but they said human rights law which has been specifically written to delete all human rights at the behest of the state (the Cult). Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights relates to the right to a private life. The crucial word here is *'except'*:

> There shall be no interference by a public authority with the exercise of this right EXCEPT such as is in accordance with the law and is necessary in a democratic society in the interests of national security, public safety or the economic wellbeing of the country, for the prevention of disorder or crime, for the protection of health or morals, or for the protection of the rights and freedoms of others [My emphasis].

No interference *except* in accordance with the law means there *are* no 'human rights' *except* what EU governments decide you can have at their behest. 'As is necessary in a democratic society' explains that reference in the judgement and 'in the interests of national security, public safety or the economic well-being of the country, for the prevention of disorder or crime, for the protection of health or morals, or for the protection of the rights and freedoms of others' gives the EU a coach and horses to ride through 'human rights' and scatter them in all directions. The judiciary is not a check and balance on government extremism; it is a vehicle to enforce it. This judgement was almost laughably predictable when the last thing the Cult wanted was a decision that went against mandatory vaccination. Judges rule over and over again to benefit the system of which they are a part. Vaccination disputes that come before them are invariably delivered in favour of doctors and authorities representing the view of the state which owns the judiciary. Oh, yes, and we have even had calls to stop putting 'Covid-19' on death certificates within 28 days of a 'positive test' because it is claimed the practice makes the 'vaccine' appear not to work. They are laughing at you.

The scale of madness, inhumanity and things to come was highlighted when those not 'vaccinated' for 'Covid' were refused evacuation from the Caribbean island of St Vincent during massive volcanic eruptions. Cruise ships taking residents to the safety of another island allowed only the 'vaccinated' to board and the rest were left to their fate. Even in life and death situations like this we see 'Covid' stripping people of their most basic human instincts and the insanity is even more extreme when you think that fake 'vaccine'-makers are not even claiming their body-manipulating concoctions stop 'infection' and 'transmission' of a 'virus' that doesn't exist. St Vincent Prime Minister Ralph Gonsalves said: 'The chief medical officer will be identifying the persons already vaccinated so that we can get them on the ship.' Note again the power of the chief medical officer who, like Whitty in the UK, will be answering to the World Health Organization. This is the Cult network structure that has overridden politicians who 'follow the science' which means doing what WHO-controlled 'medical officers' and 'science advisers' tell them. Gonsalves even said that residents who were 'vaccinated' after the order so they could board the ships would still be refused entry due to possible side effects such as 'wooziness in the head'. The good news is that if they were woozy enough in the head they could qualify to be prime minister of St Vincent.

Microchipping freedom

The European judgement will be used at some point to justify moves to enforce the 'Covid' DNA-manipulating procedure. Sandra Ro, CEO of the Global Blockchain Business Council, told a World Economic Forum event that she hoped 'vaccine passports' would help to 'drive forced consent and standardisation' of global digital identity schemes: 'I'm hoping with the desire and global demand for some sort of vaccine passport – so that people can get travelling and working again – [it] will drive forced consent, standardisation, and frankly, cooperation across the world.' The lady is either not very bright, or thoroughly mendacious, to use the term 'forced consent'.

You do not 'consent' if you are forced – you *submit*. She was describing what the plan has been all along and that's to enforce a digital identity on every human without which they could not function. 'Vaccine passports' are opening the door and are far from the end goal. A digital identity would allow you to be tracked in everything you do in cyberspace and this is the same technique used by Cult-owned China to enforce its social credit system of total control. The ultimate 'passport' is planned to be a microchip as my books have warned for nearly 30 years. Those nice people at the Pentagon working for the Cult-controlled Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) claimed in April, 2021, they have developed a microchip inserted under the skin to detect 'asymptomatic Covid-19 infection' before it becomes an outbreak and a 'revolutionary filter' that can remove the 'virus' from the blood when attached to a dialysis machine. The only problems with this are that the 'virus' does not exist and people transmitting the 'virus' with no symptoms is brain-numbing bullshit. This is, of course, not a ruse to get people to be microchipped for very different reasons. DARPA also said it was producing a one-stop 'vaccine' for the 'virus' and all 'variants'. One of the most sinister organisations on Planet Earth is doing this? Better have it then. These people are insane because Wetiko that possesses them is insane.

Researchers from the Salk Institute in California announced they have created an embryo that is part human and part monkey. My books going back to the 1990s have exposed experiments in top secret underground facilities in the United States where humans are being crossed with animal and non-human 'extraterrestrial' species. They are now easing that long-developed capability into the public arena and there is much more to come given we are dealing with psychiatric basket cases. Talking of which – Elon Musk's scientists at Neuralink trained a monkey to play Pong and other puzzles on a computer screen using a joystick and when the monkey made the correct move a metal tube squirted banana smoothie into his mouth which is the basic technique for training humans into unquestioning compliance. Two Neuralink chips were in the monkey's skull and

more than 2,000 wires 'fanned out' into its brain. Eventually the monkey played a video game purely with its brain waves. Psychopathic narcissist Musk said the 'breakthrough' was a step towards putting Neuralink chips into human skulls and merging minds with artificial intelligence. *Exactly*. This man is so dark and Cult to his DNA.

World Economic Fascism (WEF)

The World Economic Forum is telling you the plan by the statements made at its many and various events. Cult-owned fascist YouTube CEO Susan Wojcicki spoke at the 2021 WEF Global Technology Governance Summit (see the name) in which 40 governments and 150 companies met to ensure 'the responsible design and deployment of emerging technologies'. Orwellian translation: 'Ensuring the design and deployment of long-planned technologies will advance the Cult agenda for control and censorship.' Freedom-destroyer and Nuremberg-bound Wojcicki expressed support for tech platforms like hers to censor content that is 'technically legal but could be harmful'. Who decides what is 'harmful'? She does and they do. 'Harmful' will be whatever the Cult doesn't want people to see and we have legislation proposed by the UK government that would censor content on the basis of 'harm' no matter if the information is fair, legal and provably true. Make that *especially* if it is fair, legal and provably true. Wojcicki called for a global coalition to be formed to enforce content moderation standards through automated censorship. This is a woman and mega-censor so self-deluded that she shamelessly accepted a 'free expression' award – *Wojcicki* – in an event sponsored by her own *YouTube*. They have no shame and no self-awareness.

You know that 'Covid' is a scam and Wojcicki a Cult operative when YouTube is censoring medical and scientific opinion purely on the grounds of whether it supports or opposes the Cult 'Covid' narrative. Florida governor Ron DeSantis compiled an expert panel with four professors of medicine from Harvard, Oxford, and Stanford Universities who spoke against forcing children and

vaccinated people to wear masks. They also said there was no proof that lockdowns reduced spread or death rates of 'Covid-19'. Cult-gofer Wojcicki and her YouTube deleted the panel video 'because it included content that contradicts the consensus of local and global health authorities regarding the efficacy of masks to prevent the spread of Covid-19'. This 'consensus' refers to what the Cult tells the World Health Organization to say and the WHO tells 'local health authorities' to do. Wojcicki knows this, of course. The panellists pointed out that censorship of scientific debate was responsible for deaths from many causes, but Wojcicki couldn't care less. She would not dare go against what she is told and as a disgrace to humanity she wouldn't want to anyway. The UK government is seeking to pass a fascist 'Online Safety Bill' to specifically target with massive fines and other means non-censored video and social media platforms to make them censor 'lawful but harmful' content like the Cult-owned Facebook, Twitter, Google and YouTube. What is 'lawful but harmful' would be decided by the fascist Blair-created Ofcom.

Another WEF obsession is a cyber-attack on the financial system and this is clearly what the Cult has planned to take down the bank accounts of everyone – except theirs. Those that think they have enough money for the Cult agenda not to matter to them have got a big lesson coming if they continue to ignore what is staring them in the face. The World Economic Forum, funded by Gates and fronted by Klaus Schwab, announced it would be running a 'simulation' with the Russian government and global banks of just such an attack called Cyber Polygon 2021. What they simulate – as with the 'Covid' Event 201 – they plan to instigate. The WEF is involved in a project with the Cult-owned Carnegie Endowment for International Peace called the WEF-Carnegie Cyber Policy Initiative which seeks to merge Wall Street banks, 'regulators' (I love it) and intelligence agencies to 'prevent' (arrange and allow) a cyber-attack that would bring down the global financial system as long planned by those that control the WEF and the Carnegie operation. The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace sent an instruction to First World

War US President Woodrow Wilson not to let the war end before society had been irreversibly transformed.

The Wuhan lab diversion

As I close, the Cult-controlled authorities and lapdog media are systematically pushing 'the virus was released from the Wuhan lab' narrative. There are two versions – it happened by accident and it happened on purpose. Both are nonsense. The perceived existence of the never-shown-to-exist 'virus' is vital to sell the impression that there is actually an infective agent to deal with and to allow the endless potential for terrifying the population with 'variants' of a 'virus' that does not exist. The authorities at the time of writing are going with the 'by accident' while the alternative media is promoting the 'on purpose'. Cable news host Tucker Carlson who has questioned aspects of lockdown and 'vaccine' compulsion has bought the Wuhan lab story. 'Everyone now agrees' he said. Well, I don't and many others don't and the question is *why* does the system and its media suddenly 'agree'? When the media moves as one unit with a narrative it is always a lie – witness the hour by hour mendacity of the 'Covid' era. Why would this Cult-owned combination which has unleashed lies like machine gun fire suddenly 'agree' to tell the truth??

Much of the alternative media is buying the lie because it fits the conspiracy narrative, but it's the *wrong* conspiracy. The real conspiracy is that *there is no virus* and that is what the Cult is desperate to hide. The idea that the 'virus' was released by accident is ludicrous when the whole 'Covid' hoax was clearly long-planned and waiting to be played out as it was so fast in accordance with the Rockefeller document and Event 201. So they prepared everything in detail over decades and then sat around strumming their fingers waiting for an 'accidental' release from a bio-lab? *What??* It's crazy. Then there's the 'on purpose' claim. You want to circulate a 'deadly virus' and hide the fact that you've done so and you release it down the street from the highest-level bio-lab in China? I repeat – *What??*

You would release it far from that lab to stop any association being made. But, no, we'll do it in a place where the connection was certain to be made. Why would you need to scam 'cases' and 'deaths' and pay hospitals to diagnose 'Covid-19' if you had a real 'virus'? What are sections of the alternative media doing believing this crap? Where were all the mass deaths in Wuhan from a 'deadly pathogen' when the recovery to normal life after the initial propaganda was dramatic in speed? Why isn't the 'deadly pathogen' now circulating all over China with bodies in the street? Once again we have the technique of tell them what they want to hear and they will likely believe it. The alternative media has its 'conspiracy' and with Carlson it fits with his 'China is the danger' narrative over years. China *is* a danger as a global Cult operations centre, but not for this reason. The Wuhan lab story also has the potential to instigate conflict with China when at some stage the plan is to trigger a Problem-Reaction-Solution confrontation with the West. Question everything – *everything* – and especially when the media agrees on a common party line.

Third wave ... fourth wave ... fifth wave ...

As the book went into production the world was being set up for more lockdowns and a 'third wave' supported by invented 'variants' that were increasing all the time and will continue to do so in public statements and computer programs, but not in reality. India became the new Italy in the 'Covid' propaganda campaign and we were told to be frightened of the new 'Indian strain'. Somehow I couldn't find it within myself to do so. A document produced for the UK government entitled 'Summary of further modelling of easing of restrictions – Roadmap Step 2' declared that a third wave was inevitable (of course when it's in the script) and it would be the fault of children and those who refuse the health-destroying fake 'Covid vaccine'. One of the computer models involved came from the Cult-owned *Imperial College* and the other from Warwick University which I wouldn't trust to tell me the date in a calendar factory. The document states that both models presumed extremely high uptake

of the 'Covid vaccines' and didn't allow for 'variants'. The document states: 'The resurgence is a result of some people (mostly children) being ineligible for vaccination; others choosing not to receive the vaccine; and others being vaccinated but not perfectly protected.' The mendacity takes the breath away. Okay, blame those with a brain who won't take the DNA-modifying shots and put more pressure on children to have it as 'trials' were underway involving children as young as six months with parents who give insanity a bad name. Massive pressure is being put on the young to have the fake 'vaccine' and child age consent limits have been systematically lowered around the world to stop parents intervening. Most extraordinary about the document was its claim that the 'third wave' would be driven by 'the resurgence in both hospitalisations and deaths … dominated by *those that have received two doses of the vaccine*, comprising around 60-70% of the wave respectively'. The predicted peak of the 'third wave' suggested 300 deaths per day with 250 of them *fully 'vaccinated' people*. How many more lies do acquiescers need to be told before they see the obvious? Those who took the jab to 'protect themselves' are projected to be those who mostly get sick and die? So what's in the 'vaccine'? The document went on:

> It is possible that a summer of low prevalence could be followed by substantial increases in incidence over the following autumn and winter. Low prevalence in late summer should not be taken as an indication that SARS-CoV-2 has retreated or that the population has high enough levels of immunity to prevent another wave.

They are telling you the script and while many British people believed 'Covid' restrictions would end in the summer of 2021 the government was preparing for them to be ongoing. Authorities were awarding contracts for 'Covid marshals' to police the restrictions with contracts starting in July, 2021, and going through to January 31st, 2022, and the government was advertising for 'Media Buying Services' to secure media propaganda slots worth a potential £320 million for 'Covid-19 campaigns' with a contract not ending until March, 2022. The recipient – via a list of other front companies – was reported to be American media marketing giant Omnicom Group

Inc. While money is no object for 'Covid' the UK waiting list for all other treatment – including life-threatening conditions – passed 4.5 million. Meantime the Cult is seeking to control all official 'inquiries' to block revelations about what has really been happening and why. It must not be allowed to – we need Nuremberg jury trials in every country. The cover-up doesn't get more obvious than appointing ultra-Zionist professor Philip Zelikow to oversee two dozen US virologists, public health officials, clinicians, former government officials and four American 'charitable foundations' to 'learn the lessons' of the 'Covid' debacle. The personnel will be those that created and perpetuated the 'Covid' lies while Zelikow is the former executive director of the 9/11 Commission who ensured that the truth about those attacks never came out and produced a report that must be among the most mendacious and manipulative documents ever written – see *The Trigger* for the detailed exposure of the almost unimaginable 9/11 story in which Sabbatians can be found at every level.

Passive no more

People are increasingly challenging the authorities with amazing numbers of people taking to the streets in London well beyond the ability of the Face-Nappies to stop them. Instead the Nappies choose situations away from the mass crowds to target, intimidate, and seek to promote the impression of 'violent protestors'. One such incident happened in London's Hyde Park. Hundreds of thousands walking through the streets in protest against 'Covid' fascism were ignored by the Cult-owned BBC and most of the rest of the mainstream media, but they delighted in reporting how police were injured in 'clashes with protestors'. The truth was that a group of people gathered in Hyde Park at the end of one march when most had gone home and they were peacefully having a good time with music and chat. Face-Nappies who couldn't deal with the full-march crowd then waded in with their batons and got more than they bargained for. Instead of just standing for this criminal brutality the crowd used their numerical superiority to push the Face-Nappies out of the

park. Eventually the Nappies turned and ran. Unfortunately two or three idiots in the crowd threw drink cans striking two officers which gave the media and the government the image they wanted to discredit the 99.9999 percent who were peaceful. The idiots walked straight into the trap and we must always be aware of potential agent provocateurs used by the authorities to discredit their targets.

This response from the crowd – the can people apart – must be a turning point when the public no longer stand by while the innocent are arrested and brutally attacked by the Face-Nappies. That doesn't mean to be violent, that's the last thing we need. We'll leave the violence to the Face-Nappies and government. But it does mean that when the Face-Nappies use violence against peaceful people the numerical superiority is employed to stop them and make citizen's arrests or Common Law arrests for a breach of the peace. The time for being passive in the face of fascism is over.

We are the many, they are the few, and we need to make that count before there is no freedom left and our children and grandchildren face an ongoing fascist nightmare.

COME ON PEOPLE – IT'S TIME.

One final thought …

The power of love
A force from above
Cleaning my soul
Flame on burn desire
Love with tongues of fire
Purge the soul
Make love your goal

I'll protect you from the hooded claw
Keep the vampires from your door
When the chips are down I'll be around
With my undying, death-defying
Love for you

Envy will hurt itself
Let yourself be beautiful
Sparkling love, flowers
And pearls and pretty girls
Love is like an energy
Rushin' rushin' inside of me

This time we go sublime
Lovers entwine, divine, divine,
Love is danger, love is pleasure
Love is pure – the only treasure

I'm so in love with you
Purge the soul
Make love your goal

The power of love
A force from above
Cleaning my soul
The power of love
A force from above
A sky-scraping dove

Flame on burn desire
Love with tongues of fire
Purge the soul
Make love your goal

Frankie Goes To Hollywood

APPENDIX

Cowan-Kaufman-Morell Statement on Virus Isolation (SOVI)

Isolation: The action of isolating; the fact or condition of being isolated or standing alone; separation from other things or persons; solitariness
Oxford English Dictionary

The controversy over whether the SARS-CoV-2 virus has ever been isolated or purified continues. However, using the above definition, common sense, the laws of logic and the dictates of science, any unbiased person must come to the conclusion that the SARS-CoV-2 virus has never been isolated or purified. As a result, no confirmation of the virus' existence can be found. The logical, common sense, and scientific consequences of this fact are:

- the structure and composition of something not shown to exist can't be known, including the presence, structure, and function of any hypothetical spike or other proteins;
- the genetic sequence of something that has never been found can't be known;
- "variants" of something that hasn't been shown to exist can't be known;
- it's impossible to demonstrate that SARS-CoV-2 causes a disease called Covid-19.

In as concise terms as possible, here's the proper way to isolate, characterize and demonstrate a new virus. First, one takes samples (blood, sputum, secretions) from many people (e.g. 500) with symptoms which are unique and specific enough to characterize an illness. Without mixing these samples with ANY tissue or products that also contain genetic material, the virologist macerates, filters and ultracentrifuges i.e. *purifies* the specimen. This common virology technique, done for decades to isolate bacteriophages[1] and so-called giant viruses in every virology lab, then allows the virologist to demonstrate with electron microscopy thousands of identically sized and shaped particles. These particles are the isolated and purified virus.

These identical particles are then checked for uniformity by physical and/or microscopic techniques. Once the purity is determined, the particles may be further characterized. This would include examining the structure, morphology, and chemical composition of the particles. Next, their genetic makeup is characterized by extracting the genetic material directly from the purified particles and using genetic-sequencing techniques, such as Sanger sequencing, that have also been around for decades. Then one does an analysis to confirm that these uniform particles are exogenous (outside) in origin as a virus is conceptualized to be, and not the normal breakdown products of dead and dying tissues.[2] (As of May 2020, we know that virologists have no way to determine whether the particles they're seeing are viruses or just normal breakdown products of dead and dying tissues.)[3]

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1 Isolation, characterization and analysis of bacteriophages from the haloalkaline lake Elmenteita, KenyaJuliah Khayeli Akhwale et al, PLOS One, Published: April 25, 2019. https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0215734 – accessed 2/15/21

2 "Extracellular Vesicles Derived From Apoptotic Cells: An Essential Link Between Death and Regeneration," Maojiao Li1 et al, Frontiers in Cell and Developmental Biology, 2020 October 2. https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fcell.2020.573511/full – accessed 2/15/21

3 "The Role of Extraellular Vesicles as Allies of HIV, HCV and SARS Viruses," Flavia Giannessi, et al, Viruses, 2020 May

If we have come this far then we have fully isolated, characterized, and genetically sequenced an exogenous virus particle. However, we still have to show it is causally related to a disease. This is carried out by exposing a group of healthy subjects (animals are usually used) to this isolated, purified virus in the manner in which the disease is thought to be transmitted. If the animals get sick with the same disease, as confirmed by clinical and autopsy findings, one has now shown that the virus actually causes a disease. This demonstrates infectivity and transmission of an infectious agent.

None of these steps has even been attempted with the SARS-CoV-2 virus, nor have all these steps been successfully performed for any so-called pathogenic virus. Our research indicates that a single study showing these steps does not exist in the medical literature.

Instead, since 1954, virologists have taken unpurified samples from a relatively few people, often less than ten, with a similar disease. They then minimally process this sample and inoculate this unpurified sample onto tissue culture containing usually four to six other types of material – all of which contain identical genetic material as to what is called a "virus." The tissue culture is starved and poisoned and naturally disintegrates into many types of particles, some of which contain genetic material. Against all common sense, logic, use of the English language and scientific integrity, this process is called "virus isolation." This brew containing fragments of genetic material from many sources is then subjected to genetic analysis, which then creates in a computer-simulation process the alleged sequence of the alleged virus, a so called in silico genome. At no time is an actual virus confirmed by electron microscopy. At no time is a genome extracted and sequenced from an actual virus. This is scientific fraud.

The observation that the unpurified specimen — inoculated onto tissue culture along with toxic antibiotics, bovine fetal tissue, amniotic fluid and other tissues — destroys the kidney tissue onto which it is inoculated is given as evidence of the virus' existence and pathogenicity. This is scientific fraud.

From now on, when anyone gives you a paper that suggests the SARS-CoV-2 virus has been isolated, please check the methods sections. If the researchers used Vero cells or any other culture method, you know that their process was not isolation. You will hear the following excuses for why actual isolation isn't done:

1. There were not enough virus particles found in samples from patients to analyze.

2. Viruses are intracellular parasites; they can't be found outside the cell in this manner.

If No. 1 is correct, and we can't find the virus in the sputum of sick people, then on what evidence do we think the virus is dangerous or even lethal? If No. 2 is correct, then how is the virus spread from person to person? We are told it emerges from the cell to infect others. Then why isn't it possible to find it?

Finally, questioning these virology techniques and conclusions is not some distraction or divisive issue. Shining the light on this truth is essential to stop this terrible fraud that humanity is confronting. For, as we now know, if the virus has never been isolated, sequenced or shown to cause illness, if the virus is imaginary, then why are we wearing masks, social distancing and putting the whole world into prison?

Finally, if pathogenic viruses don't exist, then what is going into those injectable devices erroneously called "vaccines," and what is their purpose? This scientific question is the most urgent and relevant one of our time.

We are correct. The SARS-CoV2 virus does not exist.

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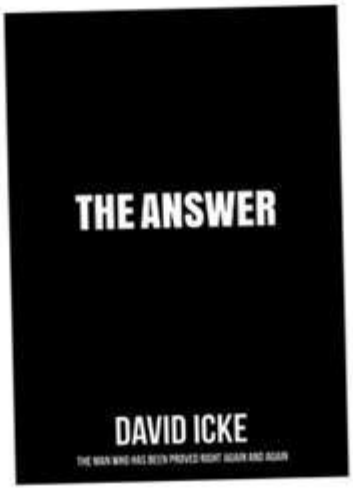

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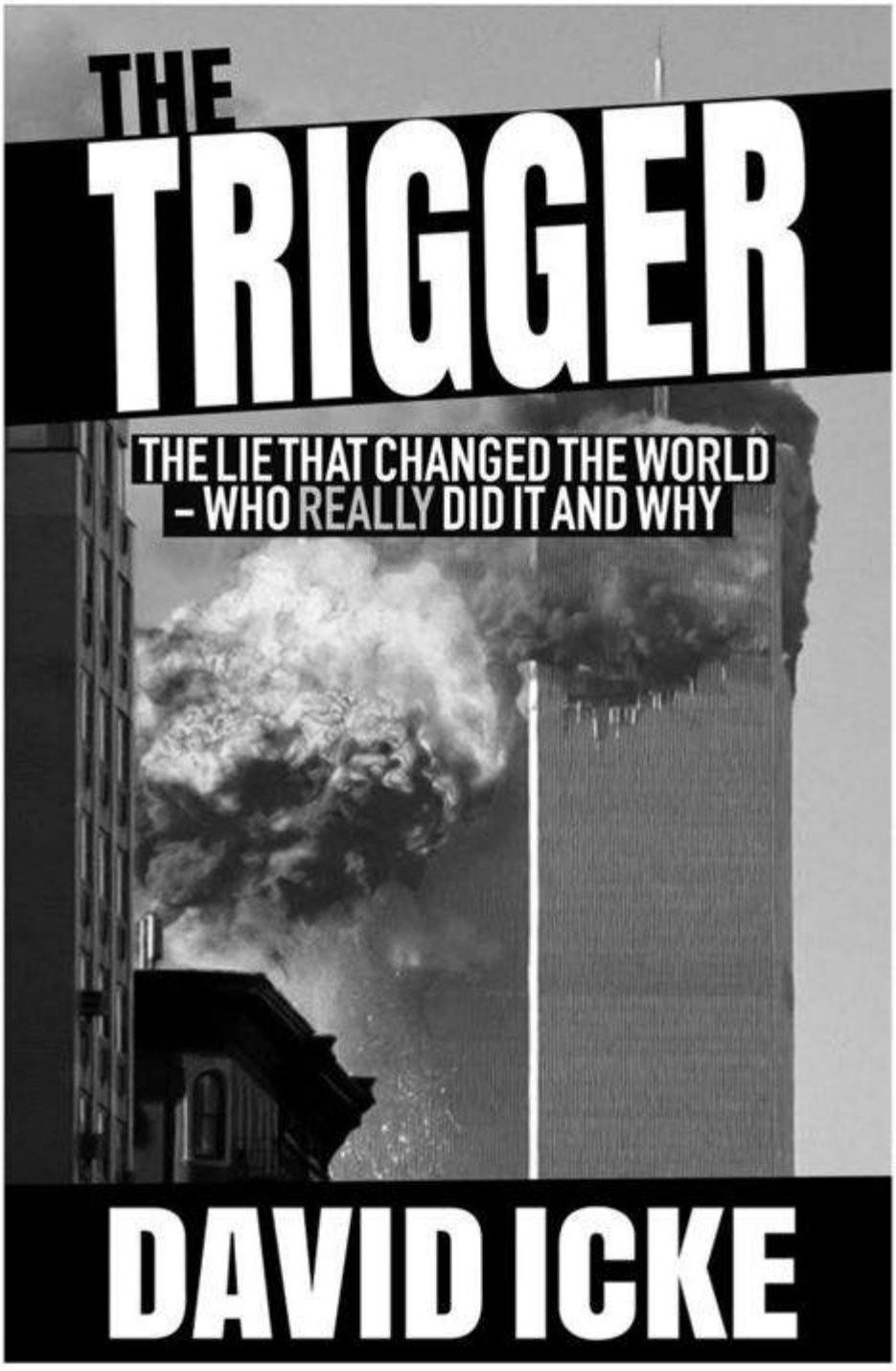
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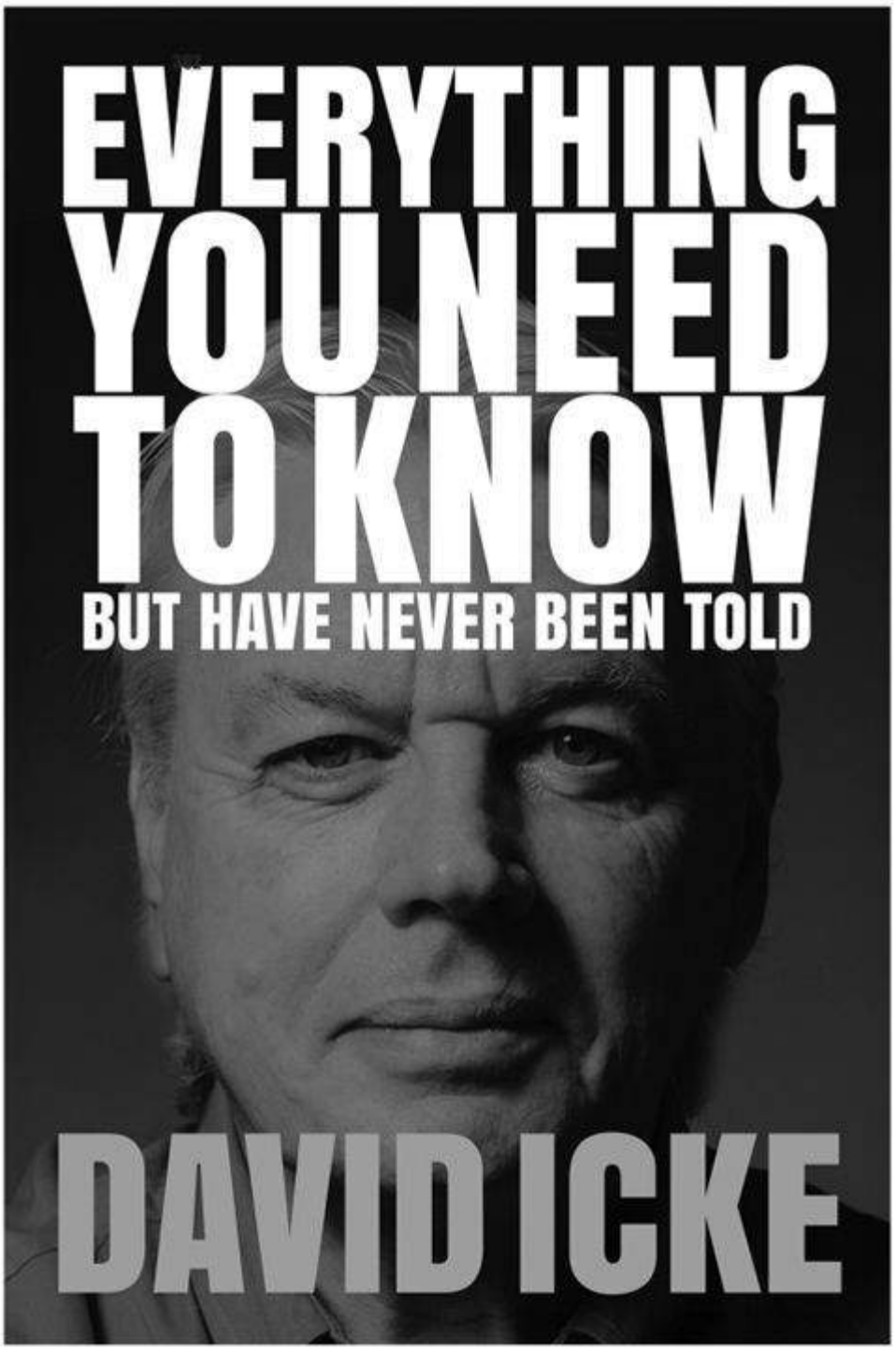
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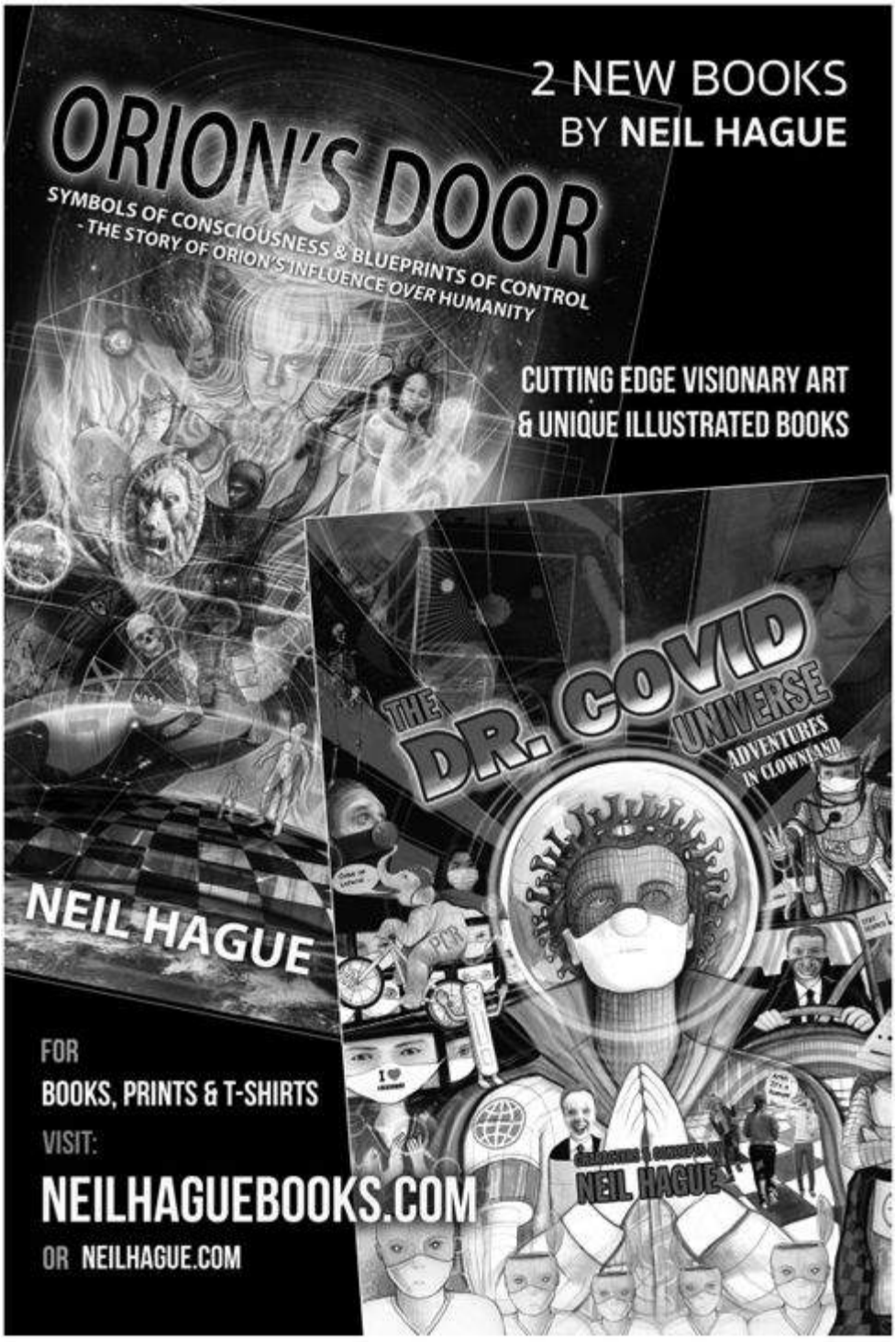
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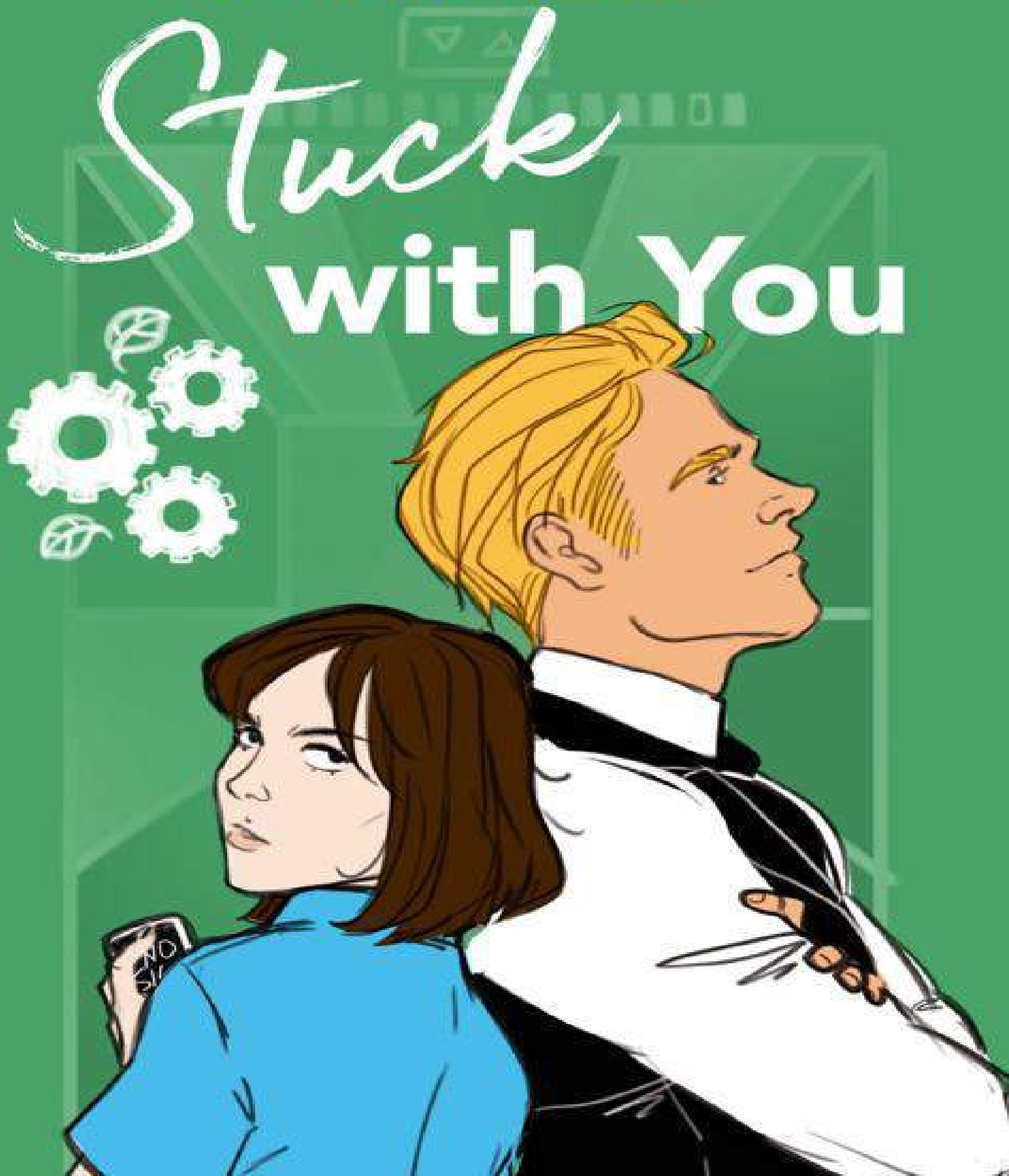
New York Times Bestselling Author of *The Love Hypothesis*

Stuck with You



PRAISE FOR

The Love Hypothesis

“Contemporary romance’s unicorn: the elusive marriage of deeply brainy and delightfully escapist. . . . *The Love Hypothesis* has wild commercial appeal, but the quieter secret is that there is a specific audience, made up of all the Olives in the world, who have deeply, ardently waited for this exact book.”

—*New York Times* bestselling author Christina Lauren

“Funny, sexy, and smart. Ali Hazelwood did a terrific job with *The Love Hypothesis*.”

—*New York Times* bestselling author Mariana Zapata

“This tackles one of my favorite tropes—Grumpy meets Sunshine—in a fun and utterly endearing way. . . . I loved the nods toward fandom and romance novels, and I couldn’t put it down. Highly recommended!”

—*New York Times* bestselling author Jessica Clare

“A beautifully written romantic comedy with a heroine you will instantly fall in love with, *The Love Hypothesis* is destined to earn a place on your keeper shelf.”

—Elizabeth Everett, author of *A Lady’s Formula for Love*

“Smart, witty dialogue and a diverse cast of likable secondary characters. . . . A realistic, amusing novel that readers won’t be able to put down.”

—*Library Journal* (starred review)

“With whip-smart and endearing characters, snappy prose, and a quirky take on a favorite trope, Hazelwood convincingly navigates the fraught shoals of academia. . . . This smart, sexy contemporary should delight a wide swath of romance lovers.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

Titles by Ali Hazelwood

The Love Hypothesis

LOATHE TO LOVE YOU

Under One Roof

Stuck with You

Below Zero

Stuck with You

Ali Hazelwood

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For Marie, my fave Elizabeth Swann

Chapter 1

Present

My world comes to an end at 10:43 on a Friday night, when the elevator lurches to a stop between the eighth and seventh floor of the building that houses the engineering firm where I work. The ceiling lights flicker. Then go off completely. Then, after a stretch that lasts about five seconds but feels like several decades, come back with the slightly yellower tinge of the emergency bulb.

Crap.

Fun fact: This is actually the second time my world came to an end tonight. The first was less than a minute ago. When the elevator I'm riding stopped on the thirteenth floor, and Erik Nowak, the last person I ever wanted to see, appeared in all his blond, massive, Viking-like glory. He studied me for what felt like too long, took a step inside, and then studied me some more while I avidly inspected the tips of my shoes.

Re-crap.

It's a slightly complicated situation. I work in New York City, and my company, GreenFrame, rents a small office on the eighteenth floor of a Manhattan building. Very small. It has to be very small, because we're a baby firm, still establishing ourselves in a pretty cutthroat market, and we don't always make a ton of money. I guess that's what happens when you value things like sustainability, environmental protection, economic viability and efficiency, renewability rather than depletion, minimization of exposure to potential hazards such as toxic materials, and . . . well, I won't bore you with the Wikipedia entry on green engineering. Suffice it to say, my boss, Gianna (who coincidentally is the only other engineer working full-time at the firm), founded GreenFrame with the aim of creating great structures that actually make sense within their environment, and is delightfully, crunchily hard-core about it. Unfortunately, that doesn't always pay very well. Or well.

Or at all.

So, yeah. Like I said, a slightly complicated situation, especially when compared with more traditional engineering companies that don't focus as much on conservation and pollution control. Like ProBld. The giant firm where Erik Nowak works. The one that takes up the whole thirteenth floor. And the twelfth. Maybe the eleventh, too? I lost track.

So when the elevator began to slow down around the fourteenth floor, I felt a surge of apprehension, which I naively discarded as mere paranoia. You have nothing to worry about, Sadie, I told myself. ProBld has tons of offices. They're always expanding. Orchestrating "mergers" and eating up smaller firms. Like the Blob. They are truly the corrosive alien amoeboidal entity of the business, which translates to hundreds of people working for them, which in turn means that any one out of those hundreds of people could be calling the elevator. Any one. There's no way it's Erik Nowak.

Yeah. No.

It was Erik Nowak, all right. With his massive, colossal presence. Erik Nowak, who spent the entirety of our five-floor ride staring at me with those ruthless, icy blue eyes of his. Erik Nowak, who's currently looking up at the emergency light with a slight frown.

"The power's out," he says, an obvious statement, with that stupidly deep voice of his. It hasn't changed one whit since the last time we talked. Nor since that string of messages he left on my phone before I blocked his number. The ones that I never bothered answering but also couldn't quite bring myself to delete. The ones I could not stop myself from listening to, over and over.

And over.

It's still a stupid voice. Stupid and insidious, rich and precise and clipped and low, with acoustic properties all its own. "I moved here from Denmark when I was fourteen," he told me at dinner when I asked him about his accent, slight, hard to detect, but definitely there. "My younger brothers got rid of it, but I never managed." His face was as stern as usual, but I could see his mouth soften, a slight uptick on the corner that felt like a smile. "As you can imagine, there was lots of teasing growing up."

After the night we spent together, after all that happened between us, I felt as if I couldn't get the way he pronounced words out of my head. For days I constantly squirmed, turning around because I thought I'd heard him somewhere in my proximity. Thought that maybe he was nearby, even

though I was jogging at the park, alone in the office, in line at the grocery store. It just stuck to me, coated the shell of my ears and the inside of my—

"Sadie?" Erik's infamous voice cuts through my thoughts. It has that tone, the one of someone who's repeating himself, and maybe not just for the first time. "Does it?"

"Does . . . what?" I glance up, finding him next to the control panel. In the stark shadows of the emergency light he's still so . . . God. Looking at his handsome face is a mistake. He is a mistake. "I'm sorry, I . . . What did you say?"

"Does your phone work?" he asks again, patient. Kind.

Why is he so kind? He was never supposed to be kind. After what happened between us, I decided to torture myself by asking around about him, and the word *kind* never came up. Not once. One of New York's top engineers, people would often say. Known for being as good at his job as he is surly. No-nonsense, aloof, standoffish. Though he was never any of these things with me. Until he was, of course.

"Um." I fish my phone out of the back pocket of my black tailored pants and press the home button. "No service. But this is a Faraday cage," I think out loud, "and the elevator shaft is steel. No RF signal is going to be able to make a loop and . . ." I notice the way Erik is staring at me and abruptly shut up. Right. He's an engineer, too. He already knows all of this. I clear my throat. "No signal, no."

Erik nods. "Wi-Fi should work, but it doesn't. So maybe this is—"

"—a building-wide power outage?"

"Maybe even the whole block."

Shit.

Shit, shit, shit. Shit.

Erik seems to be reading my mind, because he studies me for a moment and says reassuringly, "It might be for the best. Someone is bound to check the elevators if they know that the power's gone." He pauses before adding, "Although it might take a while." Painfully honest. As usual.

"How long?"

He shrugs. "A few hours?"

A few what? A few hours? In an elevator that is smaller than my already-minuscule bathroom? With Erik Nowak, the broodiest of Scandinavian mountains? Erik Nowak, the man who I . . .

No. No way.

“There must be something we can do,” I say, trying to sound collected. I swear I’m not panicking. No more than a lot.

“Nothing that I can think of.”

“But . . . what do we do now, then?” I ask, hating how whiny my voice is.

Erik lets his messenger bag drop to the floor with a thump. He leans against the wall opposite mine, which should theoretically give me some room to breathe, even though for some physics-defying reason he still feels too close. I watch him slide his phone in the front pocket of his jeans and cross his arms on his chest. His eyes are cold, unreadable, but there is a faint gleam in them that has a shiver running down my spine.

“Now,” he says, gaze locked with mine, “we wait.”

It’s 10:45 on a Friday night. And for the third time in less than ten minutes, my world crashes to an end.

Chapter 2

Three weeks ago

There are worse things in the world.

There are, without a single doubt, giant heaps of worse things in the world. Wet socks. PMS. The *Star Wars* prequels. Oatmeal raisin cookies that masquerade as chocolate chip, slow Wi-Fi, climate change and income inequality, dandruff, traffic, the finale of *Game of Thrones*, tarantulas, food-scented soap, people who hate soccer, daylight saving time (when it moves one hour ahead, not behind), toxic masculinity, the unjustly short life span of guinea pigs—all of these, just to name a small handful, are truly terrible, dreadful, horrific things. Because such is the way of the universe: it's full of bad, sad, upsetting, unfair, enraging circumstances, and I should know better than to pout like a ten-year-old who's half an inch too short for the roller coaster when Faye tells me from behind the counter of her small coffee shop:

"Sorry, honey, we're all out of croissants."

To be clear: I don't even want a croissant. Which I know sounds weird (everybody should *always* want a croissant; it's a law of physics, like the Fermi paradox or Einstein's field equation), but the truth is, I would gladly do without *this* specific croissant—if this were a regular Tuesday morning.

Unfortunately, today is pitch day. Which means that I'm meeting with potential future GreenFrame clients. I talk to them, tell them the hundreds of little things I can do to help them manage large-scale sustainable building projects, and hope they'll decide to hire us. It's what I've been doing for about eight months, ever since I finished my Ph.D.: I try to bring in new clients; I try to keep the ones we already have; I try to ease Gianna's workload, since she just had her first baby—who, incidentally, is three babies. Apparently, triplets do happen. And they're adorable, but they also wake one another up in the middle of the night in a never-ending spiral of sleeplessness and exhaustion. Who would have thought? But back to the clients: GreenFrame has been venturing dangerously close to not-quite-in-

the-black territory, and today's pitch meeting is critical to keep the red at bay.

Enter the croissants. And that other little problem I happen to have: I am a little superstitious. Just a tad. Just a little stitious. I have developed a complex system of rituals and apotropaic gestures that need to be performed to ensure that my pitch meetings will go as planned. I have more years of science education than anyone ever needed, and should probably know better than to believe that the color of my socks is in any way predictive of my professional success. But do I?

Nope.

Back in college, it was exactly three braids in my hair for every single soccer game (plus two coats of L'Oréal mascara if we were playing away) and I had to listen to "Dancing Queen" and "My Immortal" before each and every final—strictly in that order. Thank God I managed to graduate on time, because the emotional whiplash was starting to grind at me.

Not that this issue of mine is something I like to admit widely. Mostly just to Mara and Hannah, my supposed best friends. We met during the first year of our Ph.D.'s and have been lumbering together through the tribulations of STEM academia ever since. For the most part, having them in my life has been my one true joy, but there have been less-than-outstanding aspects of it. For instance, the fact that during the four years we lived together they oscillated between staging anti-superstition interventions and pranking me by inviting stray black cats into our apartment on every Friday the 13th. (We even ended up adopting one for a few months, JimBob, till we noticed that the kitty in the Missing flyers all over the neighborhood suspiciously resembled him; JimBob was, in fact, Mrs. Fluffpuff, and we returned her quietly, in the middle of the night. She's been dearly missed ever since.) Anyway, yes: I have horrible, amazing, superstition-unsupportive BFFs. But we don't live together anymore. We don't even live in the same city: Mara is in D.C. at the EPA, and Hannah has been working for NASA and commuting between Texas and Norway. I can throw salt over my shoulder and frantically look around for wood to knock on to my heart's content.

Why, *why* am I like this? I have no clue. Let's just blame my aggressively Italian mother.

But back to this Tuesday morning: the crux of my problem, you see, is that back in the winter, before my most successful client pitch to date, I got

a bit peckish. So I popped into Faye's hole-in-the-wall coffee shop, and instead of just asking for the usual—punishingly black coffee: no sugar, no cream, just the bitter oblivion of darkness—I tacked a croissant on to my order. It was just as good as the coffee (i.e., simultaneously stale and undercooked; taste hovering between starch and salmonella) and, to my eternal dismay, was promptly followed by me bagging the most lucrative contract GreenFrame had seen in its young history.

Gianna was over the moon. And so was I, until my half-Italian brain started forming a million little connections between the croissant from hell and my big professional win. You know where this is going: yes, I now desperately feel that I must eat one of Faye's croissants before every single pitch meeting, otherwise the unthinkable will happen. And no, I have no idea how to react to her kind but definitive, "Sorry, honey, we're all out of croissants."

Did I say that there are worse things in the world? I lied. This is a disaster. My career is over. Are those sirens in the distance?

"I see." I bite into my lower lip, order it to un-pout itself, and force myself to smile. After all, it's not Faye's fault if my mom drilled into my baby neurons that walking under the stairs is a surefire way to a lifetime of despair. I go to therapy for that. Or I will. At some point. "Are you, um, making more?"

She looks at the display case. "I've got muffins left. Blueberry. Lemon glaze."

Oh. That actually sounds good. But. "No croissants, though?"

"And I can make you a bagel. Cinnamon? Blueberry? Plain?"

"Is that a no on the croissants?"

Faye cocks her head with a pleased expression. "You really like my croissants, don't you?"

Do I? "They're so, um." I clutch the strap of my fake-leather messenger bag. "Unique."

"Well, unfortunately I just gave the last one to Erik over there." Faye points to her left, toward the very end of the counter, but I barely glance at Erik-over-there—*tall man, broad shoulders, wears suit, boring*—too busy cursing my own timing. I should *not* have spent twenty minutes tickling the majestic beauty of Ozzy's little guinea pig tush. I am now rightfully paying for my mistakes, and Faye is giving me an assessing stare. "I'll toast you a

bagel. You're too skinny to skip breakfast. Eat more and you might grow a little taller, too."

I doubt I'll manage to finally push past five feet at the ripe old age of twenty-seven, but who's to say. "Just to recap," I say, in one last pleading, whiny attempt at salvaging my professional future, "you're *not* making more croissants today?"

Faye's eyes narrow. "Honey, you might like my croissants a little *too* much—"

"Here."

The voice—not Faye's—is deep and pitched low, coming from somewhere above my head. But I barely pay it any attention because I'm too busy staring at the croissant that has miraculously appeared in front of my eyes. It's still whole, set on top of a napkin, a few stray flakes of dough slowly crumbling off its top. I've had Faye's croissants before, and I know that what they lack in taste they make up for in size. They are very, very large.

Even when delivered by a very, very large hand.

I blink at it for several seconds, wondering if this is a superstition-induced mirage. Then I slowly turn around to look at the man who deposited the croissant on the counter.

He's already gone. Half out of the door, and all I get is a brief impression of broad shoulders and light hair.

"What—?" I blink at Faye, pointing at the man. "What . . . ?"

"I guess Erik decided you should have the last croissant."

"Why?"

She shrugs. "Wouldn't look a gift croissant in the mouth if I were you."

Gift croissant.

I shrug myself out of my stupor, toss a five-dollar bill in the tip jar, and run out of the café. "Hey!" I call. The man is about twenty steps ahead of me. Well, twenty steps with my tiny legs. Might be less than five with his own. "Hey, could you wait a . . . ?"

He doesn't stop, so I clutch my croissant and hurry after him. I channel my best Former Soccer Scholarship Kid self and dodge a lady walking her dog, then her dog, then two teenagers making out on the sidewalk. I catch up right around the corner, when I come to a halt in front of him.

"Hey." I grin up. And up and up and up. He's taller than I calculated. And I'm more winded than I'd like. I need to work out more. "Thank you *so*

much! You really didn’t have to . . .” I fall silent. For no real reason other than because of how striking he looks. He is just so . . .

Scandinavian, maybe. Viking-like. Norse. Like his ancestors frolicked below the aurora borealis on their way to funding Ikea. He is as big as a yeti, with clear blue eyes and short, pale-blond hair, and I would bet my gift croissant that his name contains one of those cool Nordic letters. The *a* and the *e* smushed together; that weird *o* slashed through the middle; the big *b* that’s actually two *s*’s stacked on top of each other. Something that requires a lot of HTML knowledge to be typed.

It takes me by surprise, that’s all, and for a moment I’m not sure what to say and just stare up. The strong jaw. The deep-set eyes. The way the angular parts of his face come together into something very, very handsome.

Then I realize that he’s staring back, and instantly become self-conscious. I know exactly what he’s seeing: the blue button-down I tucked into my chinos; the bangs I really need to trim; the brown, shoulder-length hair I *also* need to trim; and then, of course, the croissant.

The croissant! “Thank you *so* much!” I smile. “I didn’t mean to steal your food.”

No reply.

“I could pay you back.”

Still no reply. Just that North Germanic, severe stare.

“Or I could buy you a muffin. Or a bagel. I really didn’t mean to interfere with your breakfast.”

Number of replies: zero. Intensity of stare: many millions. Does he even understand what I’m— Oh.

Ooooh.

“*Thank*. *You*,” I say, very, very slowly, like when my mom’s side of the family, the one that never immigrated to the U.S., attempts to speak Italian with me. “For”—I lift the croissant in front of my face—“this. Thank”—I point at the Viking—“*you*. You are very”—I tilt my head and scrunch my nose happily—“*nice*.” He stares even longer, pensive. I don’t think he got it. “You don’t understand, do you?” I murmur to myself dejectedly. “Well, thank you again. You really did me a solid there.” I lift the croissant one last time, like I’m toasting him. Then I turn around and begin to walk away.

“You’re welcome. Although you’ll find that the croissant leaves much to be desired.”

I whirl back to him. Blondie the Viking is looking at me with an indecipherable expression. “D-did you just speak?”

“I did.”

“In English?”

“I believe so, yes.”

I feel my soul crawl outside my body to astral project itself into the burning flames of hell out of pure, sheer embarrassment. “You . . . you weren’t saying anything. Before.”

He shrugs. His eyes are calm and serious. The span of his shoulders could easily moonlight as a plateau in Eurasia. “You didn’t ask a question.” His grammar is better than mine and I am withering inside.

“I thought . . . It seemed . . . I . . .” I close my eyes, remembering the way I mimicked the word *nice* for him. I think I want to die. I want this to be over. Yes, my time has come. “I am very grateful.”

“You probably won’t be, once you try the croissant.”

“No, I . . .” I wince. “I know it’s not good.”

“You do?” He crosses his arms on his chest and gives me a curious look. He’s wearing a suit, like 99 percent of the men who work on this block. Except that he looks unlike any other man I’ve ever seen. He looks like a corporate version of Thor. Like Platinum Ragnarok. I wish he’d smile at me, instead of just observing me. I’d feel less intimidated. “Could have fooled me.”

“I— The thing is, I don’t really *want* to eat it. I just need it for a . . . for a thing.”

His eyebrow lifts. “A thing?”

“It’s a long story.” I scratch my nose. “Kind of embarrassing, actually.”

“I see.” He presses his lips together and nods thoughtfully. “More or less embarrassing than you assuming I don’t speak English?”

The swift and violent death I was talking about earlier? I need it now. “I am so, *so* sorry about that. I really didn’t—”

“Watch out.”

I look around to see what he means right as some guy almost runs me over with his skateboard. It’s a close call: between the precious croissant I clearly feel ambivalent about and my bag, I nearly lose my balance, and that’s where Corporate Thor intervenes. He moves way quicker than anyone his size should be able to and slides between me and Skateboard Guy, straightening me with a hand around my biceps.

I glance up at him, nearly out of breath. He's as towering as a Greenlandic mountain range, pressing me a bit against the window of the corner barbershop, and I think he's saved my life. My professional life, of course. And now also my *life* life.

Oh shit. "What even *is* this morning?" I mutter to no one.

"You okay?"

"Yeah. I mean, I'm clearly on a downward spiral of struggle and mortification, but . . ."

He keeps his eyes and the angles of his handsome, aggressive, unusual face on me. His expression is grave, unsmiling, but for a fraction of a second a thought runs through my head.

He's amused. He finds me funny.

It's a fleeting impression. It lingers a brief moment and dissolves the instant he lets go of my biceps. But I don't think I imagined it. I'm almost sure I didn't, because of what happens next.

"I think," he says, his voice more delicious than Faye's croissants could ever hope to be, "that I'd like to hear that long, embarrassing story of yours."

Chapter 3

Present

I'm almost positive that the elevator is shrinking.

Nothing dramatic, really. But I estimate that every minute we spend in here, the car gets a couple of millimeters smaller. I've tucked myself into a corner, arms around my legs and forehead on my knees. Last I glanced up, Erik was in the opposite corner, looking fairly relaxed. Mile-long legs stretched out in front of him, sequoia-wide biceps crossed on his chest.

And, of course, the walls are looming over me. Pushing us closer and closer together. I shiver and curse power outages. The walls. Erik.

Myself.

"Are you cold?" he asks.

I lift my head. I'm wearing my usual work outfit of chinos and a nice blouse. Solid, neutral colors. Professional enough to be taken seriously; modest enough to convince the dudes I meet through work that my presence at any given meeting is to assess the efficacy of the biofiltration system design and *not* to provide them with "something cute to look at." Being a woman in engineering can be tons and tons of fun.

Erik, though . . . Erik looks a bit different. He's wearing jeans and a dark, soft sweater that stretches around his chest, and it seems unusual, given that in the past I've only ever seen him in a suit. Then again, I've only ever seen Erik twice before, technically on the same day.

(That is, if one doesn't count the times in the past month that I glimpsed him around the building and promptly turned away to change direction. Which I very much don't.)

Still, I cannot help but wonder if the reason he looks uncharacteristically informal is that earlier today he was working on-site. Supervising. Consulting. Maybe he was called in to give recommendations on the Milton project, and . . . Yeah. Not going there.

I straighten and square my shoulders. My resentment for Erik Nowak, the feeling I've been cradling in my pocket like a little mouse for the past three

weeks, the one I've been feeding bile and scraps, stirs awake. And honestly, it feels nice. Familiar. It reminds me that Erik doesn't *really* care whether I'm cold. I bet he has ulterior motives for asking. Maybe he wants to sell my organs. Or he's planning on establishing a pee corner on my rotting corpse.

"I'm fine," I say.

"You sure? I can give you my sweater."

I briefly picture him taking it off and handing it to me. I've seen him do it before in flesh and blood, which means that I wouldn't even need to get creative. I remember well the way he grabbed the collar and pulled it up over his head, his muscles flexing and contracting, the sudden expanse of pale flesh . . .

He'd hold the shirt out to me, and it'd still be warm. Maybe even smell like his skin, or like his sheets.

Wow. Wow, wow, *wow*. What *was* that? I've been in this elevator for approximately nine minutes and my brain is already developing Swiss cheese–style holes. *Holding on strong, Sadie Grantham*. *Congrats on your emotional fortitude. Way to be horny for a truly horrible person.*

"No need," I say, shaking my head a little too eagerly. "Are you sure we should just wait?" I ask. "Just—do nothing and wait?"

He nods calmly, clearly broadcasting that it's not hard for him to be a good sport about this situation, that the idea of being stuck with me doesn't bother him one bit, and that, unlike some of us, he's not tempted to bury his face in his hands and cry. Show-off.

"What if we scream?" I ask.

"Scream?"

"Yes—what if we scream? This is a giant building. Someone is bound to hear us, right?"

"At eleven on a Friday night?" His reply is much kinder than my idiotic question deserves. "While the elevator is stuck between floors? *This* elevator?"

I look away because he's right. Frustratingly right. This cursed elevator we're on is in the deepest part of the building, next to a hallway no one would walk by at night. A true tragedy, overshadowed only by the fact that it also has the narrowest car I've ever seen. Guests and clients rarely use it, which is why it has the advantage of being quicker—and the disadvantage of being small.

As in: minuscule. I knew it was tiny, but there's nothing like realizing that this might be the place where I die to register *how* tiny. If I stretch my arms, I'll bump into Erik. If I stretch my legs, I'll bump into Erik. If I thrash around on the floor like I so desperately want to, I'll *also* bump into Erik. What a quandary.

"Are you okay?" he asks softly. His eyes look soft, too. A ball of something I cannot quite define knots in my chest.

"Yeah."

"Here." He rummages in his bag for a moment. Then holds something out to me. "Have some water."

I don't know why I accept his *2019 NYC Amateur Soccer League* water bottle. I don't know why my fingers brush against his for the briefest of moments. And I don't know why, as I drink small sips, he studies me with something that resembles concern.

He's not *really* concerned, because Erik Nowak is just not that kind of guy. The kind of guy he *actually* is? A backstabber. A liar. A sentient human McMansion who values only his own professional success. An F.C. Copenhagen supporter—which, it pleases me to say, is a mediocre soccer team at best. Yes, I said what I said.

"Better?"

"I told you, I'm fine. I'm totally great."

"You look pale." His head tilts, as if to observe me better. "Are you claustrophobic?"

"No. I don't think so." Am I, though? It would explain a lot. The walls closing in. This greasy, barfy feeling in my stomach. The way I'd love to claw at this place because it's so small and Erik takes up so much room inside my head and I can smell his soap and I just want to forget everything about him and maybe I thought I had but now *he's here and it's all coming back and I—*

"Sadie." Erik is looking at me like he knows exactly what kind of spiral is currently unfolding in my brain. "Take a deep breath."

"I know. I am. Taking deep breaths, that is." Or maybe I wasn't. Because now, with some air in my lungs, my brain is getting a tad quieter.

"Is it your first time?"

I blink at him. "Breathing?"

He smiles faintly. Like he doesn't mind that we're going to die in here. "Being stuck in an elevator."

“Oh. Yes.” I think about it for a moment. “Wait, is it not yours?”

“Third.”

“Third?”

He nods.

“Are you . . . cursed, or something?”

“I see your superstitions are going strong,” he says, clearly teasing, and the idea that he thinks he *knows* me, the fact that after everything that happened he’d feel allowed to *joke* with me . . .

I stiffen.

And judging by his expression, Erik notices. “Sadie—”

“I’m fine,” I interrupt him. “I promise. But could we please just be quiet? For a little bit?” I hate how weak my voice sounds.

I set down the water bottle and hide my face back in my knees. I listen to his sharp exhale, to the tense, uncomfortable silence that falls between us, and try not to think about the last time I was with him.

When I never wanted to stop talking, not even for a second.

Chapter 4

Three weeks ago

I have my pitch meeting in one hour, a little mountain of gigabytes of files to review, and I'm pretty sure that my interns are currently eighteen floors above, trying to decide whether I abandoned them to join a cult or have been abducted by an urban Sasquatch. But I cannot help staring at Corporate Thor's mouth as he tells me, matter-of-factly:

"Money laundering front."

"No way!"

He shrugs. We are sitting right next to each other on a bench in a pocket park that, as it turns out, is just behind my building. The sun is shining, the birds are chirping, I've spotted at least three butterflies, and yet I remain vaguely intimidated by his size. And his cheekbones. "It's the only possible explanation."

I bite my lip, trying to think it through. "Couldn't Faye just be, you know . . . a really bad baker?"

"She certainly is. Her coffee is also questionable."

"It *is* very reminiscent of brake fluid," I concede.

"I always thought of plasma coolant. Point is, she was here ten years ago, when I started working in that building, and she'll be here long after you and I are gone. Despite that." He points at the croissant I'm still clutching. Honestly, I should just bite the bullet and choke it down. My hand sweat is not going to make it any tastier. "There is no valid entrepreneurial reason for her to still be in business."

I nod thoughtfully. He might have a point. "Aside from money laundering operations and ties to organized crime?"

"Precisely." Okay, his grammar might be perfect, but I'm starting to pick up a vague foreign accent. I want to ask a million and ten questions about it—a wish in direct competition with my desire to not come across as a weirdo. A lofty goal, as I am, in fact, a weirdo.

“I see your theory. But. Hear me out.” I blow my bangs out of my eyes. Erik’s expression doesn’t move a nanometer, but I know he’s listening. There is something about him, like his attention is something physically tangible, like he’s good at seeing and hearing and *knowing*. “So, remember how I talked about my . . . problem?”

“The magical-thinking one? Where you believe that your professional success relates to the items you ate for breakfast?”

I cannot believe I *admitted* to it. God, he already knows I’m a weirdo. Though, to his credit, he seems to be taking it in stride. “Okay, listen, I know it sounds like I’m foolishly clutching the atavistic remnants of ancient times.”

“Sounds?” His eyebrow lifts.

I might be flushing. “I like to think of it as . . . more of a way to bind myself and celebrate the traditions of my previous successes, you know? And less as establishing an empirical causal connection between the color of my underwear and future events.”

“I see.” The corner of his mouth twitches upward. Just barely, though—still not a smile. Maybe he’s not capable. Maybe he has a debilitating medical condition. Smilopathy: now with its very own ICD-10 code. “So, what’s the lucky color?”

“What?”

“Of underwear.”

“Oh. Um . . . lavender.”

He seems briefly stumped. “Purple?”

“Kind of, yeah.” I forgot that most men can’t name more than five colors. “A little lighter. Between purple and pink. Pastel-like.”

He nods slowly, like he’s trying to picture it. “Cute,” he says, and his tone is as simple and straightforward as it’s been in the last few minutes. There is absolutely no creepy lasciviousness, as though he’s complimenting a flower or a puppy. My heart skips a beat nonetheless.

Would he . . . ? If he saw me wearing my . . . would he still think that . . . ?

Oh my *God*. What is *wrong* with me? This poor man just gave me his *croissant*.

“Anyway,” I hasten to add, “maybe there’re a lot of people buying good luck croissants, because I’m not alone in my . . . magical thinking—nice way to put it, by the way. For example, my friend Hannah works at NASA,

and she says that the engineers there have had whole complex routines involving Planters peanuts and mission launches for the past, like, fifty years. And I'm an engineer. Basically, I'm professionally required to—"

"You're an engineer?" His eyes widen in surprise.

My heart sinks with disappointment. *Oh God. He's one of those. I can't believe he's one of those.*

I scowl and stand from the bench, looking down at him with a frown. "FYI, in the U.S., fifteen percent of the engineering workforce is made up of women. And that number has been steadily increasing, so there is no need to be so shocked that—"

"I'm not."

My frown deepens. "You sure looked like—"

"I'm an engineer myself, and it seemed like a coincidence of sorts." His mouth twitches again. "I thought your magical thinking might be tickled."

"Oh." My cheeks burn. "Oh." Wow. *Am I the Asshole, Reddit? Why, you kind of are, Sadie.* "Sorry, I didn't mean to imply—"

"Where did you study?" he asks, unruffled, pulling at my wrist till I sit again. I end up a little closer to him than I was before, but it's fine. It's okay. *Siri, how many times can I utterly humiliate myself in the span of thirty minutes? Infinite, you say? Thank you, that's what I figured.*

"Um, Caltech. I finished my Ph.D. last year. You?"

"NYU. Got my master's . . . ten, eleven years ago?"

We stare at each other, me calculating his age, him . . . I don't know. Maybe he's calculating, too. He must be six or seven years older than me. Not that it's in any way relevant. We're just chatting. We're going our separate ways in twelve seconds.

"Where do you work?" he asks.

"GreenFrame. You?"

"ProBld."

I scrunch my nose, instantly recognizing the name—from both the plaques in the lobby of my office building and the New York engineering grapevine. There are lots of firms in this area, and he works at my least favorite. The big jellyfish that keeps expanding by eating the smaller jellyfish. Not that they're terrible—they're fine. But they're old school and don't focus on sustainability nearly as much as we do. But they do have a solid rep, and some of our potential clients even choose them over us because of that. Which: bleh.

“Did you just make a repulsed face when I mentioned my company?”

“No. No! I mean, yeah. A little. But I didn’t mean it in an offensive way. They just don’t seem to adopt a whole-systems approach to problem-solving when dealing with environmental challenges . . .” His eyes shine. Is he teasing me? Does Corporate Thor *tease*? “I mean, I am now over twenty minutes late for work. Realistically, I’ll probably be fired and end up begging you guys for a job.”

He nods, lips pressed together. “Good. I have an in with the partners.”

“Is that so?”

“I’m sure they’d love to have you on board. To develop a whole-systems approach to problem-solving when dealing with environmental challenges.” I stick out my tongue, which he ignores. “What name should I give when I recommend you?”

“Oh. Sadie Grantham.” I hold out my non-croissant hand. He looks at it for a long moment, and I am suddenly, inexplicably, tsunamingly afraid. Oh my God. What if he won’t take it?

Yeah, Sadie? A wise, mean, pragmatic voice whispers in my ear. *What if a stranger won’t take your hand? How will you deal with the zero-point-zero impact it’ll have on your life?* But the voice is moot, because he does take it, and my heart gallops at how nice his skin feels, solid and a little rough. His hand swallows my fingers, warming my flesh and the cheap, cute rings I put on this morning.

“Nice to meet you, Dr. Grantham.” My breath hitches. My heart melts. I’ve had my Ph.D. for less than a year, so I still relish being called doctor. Especially because no one ever does. “Erik Nowak.”

Well. No one ever does except for Erik Nowak.

Erik Nowak. “Can I ask you something kind of inappropriate?”

He shakes his head, slowly, gravely. “Unfortunately, I am not wearing purple underwear.”

I laugh. “No, it’s . . . when you write your last name, are there cool, fancy letters in it?” I blurt the question out and instantly regret it. I’m not even sure what I’m asking. I’ll just roll with it, I guess?

“It has an *n*. And a *w*. Are they considered fancy?”

Not really. Pretty boring. “Sure.”

He nods. “What about the *k*? It’s my favorite letter.”

“Er, yeah. That’s fancy, too.” Still boring.

“But surely not the *a*?”

“Uh, well, I guess the *a* is . . .”

His mouth is twitching. Again. He’s teasing me. *Again*. I hate him.

“Damn you,” I say without heat.

He’s *almost* smiling. “No umlauts. No diacritics. No Møller. Or Kiærskou. Or Adelsköld. Though I did go to school with them.” I nod, vaguely disappointed. Till he asks: “Disappointed?” and then I can’t help hiding behind my croissant and laughing. When I’m done he’s *definitely* smiling, and he says, “You should really eat that. Or you’ll lose your client and NASA’s next rocket will explode.”

“Right, yes.” I tear a piece away. Hold it out to him. “Would you like a bite? I don’t mind sharing.”

“Really? You don’t mind sharing my own famously disgusting croissant with me?”

“What can I say?” I grin. “I’m a generous soul.”

He shakes his head. And then adds, as though it just occurred to him, “I know a really good French bistro.”

My entire body perks up. “Oh?”

“They have a bakery, too.”

My body perks up *and* tingles. “Yeah?”

“They make excellent croissants. I go there often.”

The sun is still shining, the birds are still chirping, I’ve now spotted five butterflies, and . . . the noise in the background slowly recedes. I look at Erik, study the way the shade from the trees falls across his face, study him as closely as he’s studying me.

In my life, I’ve been asked out for drinks by enough random acquaintances that I think maybe, just *maybe*, I might know what he’s trying to get at. And in my life, I’ve wanted to say no to drinks with every single one of those random acquaintances, which is why I have learned to prevent the question from even being asked. I am good at broadcasting disinterest and unavailability. Very, very good.

And yet, here I am.

On a New York bench.

Clutching a croissant.

Holding my breath and . . . hoping?

Ask me, I think at him. *Because I want to try that French bistro that you know. With you. And talk more about money laundering and a whole-*

systems approach to environmental engineering and purple underwear that is actually lavender.

Ask me, Erik Nowak. Ask me, ask me, ask me. Ask me.

There are cars in the distance, and people laughing, and emails piling up in my inbox, eighteen floors above us. But my eyes hold Erik's for a long, stretched-out moment, and when he smiles at me, I notice that his eyes are just as blue as the sky.

Chapter 5

Present

According to the plaque above the floor-selection console (which, by the way, does not include an emergency button; I am mentally composing a strongly worded email that will likely never get sent), the elevator has a 1,400-pound capacity. The inside, I'd estimate, is about fifteen square feet, fourteen of which are inconveniently taken up by Erik. (As usual: thank you, Erik.) A stainless steel handrail is installed in the innermost side, and the walls are actually quite pretty, white baked enamel or some similar material that maybe dates the car a bit, but hey, it's better than mirrors. I hate mirrors in elevators, and I'd hate them the most in *this* elevator. They'd make avoiding glimpses of Erik about three times harder than it already is.

On the ceiling, between the two energy-efficient (I hope?) recessed lights that are currently off, I noticed one large metal pane. And that's what I've been staring at for the past minute or so. I am no elevator expert, but I'm almost positive that's the emergency exit.

From my five-feet vantage point, Erik is somewhere between six-three and six-six. Based on that, I approximate that the car is about seven feet tall. Too high for me to reach on my own, and too offset from the wall for me to use the handrail as a climbing point. But. *But*, I am sure that Erik could easily lift me up. I mean, he's done it before. On several occasions, in the span of the twenty-four hours we spent together. Like when we got hungry halfway through the night: he picked me up like I was a four-pound kitten, deposited me on his kitchen counter while I gasped in awe at his beautiful, overfull fridge, and then proceeded to inspect an extensive series of Chinese leftovers before sharing them with me. Not to mention that *other* time, when we were in his shower and he put one hand under my ass to push me against the wall and . . .

The point is: he could help me reach the panel. I could dislodge it, climb out of the car, and if we're close enough to the upper floor, I might be able to pry the doors open and hoist myself out. At that point, I would be free.

Free to go home and feed Ozzy, who's no doubt currently whistling his little heart out like he always does when he hasn't eaten in more than two hours. He'd look at me like I'm a horrible rodent mother, but then he'd begrudgingly accept my carrot stick and snuggle in my lap. And of course, when my phone has reception, I'd call for help so that someone can come take care of Erik. But I wouldn't stick around to see him out, because I've already had plenty of—

"No."

I startle and look at Erik. He is still in the corner opposite mine, giving me a flat stare. "No, what?"

"It's not going to happen."

"You don't even know what—"

"You're not going to climb out of the emergency exit."

I nearly recoil, because despite my magical-thinking tendencies I am aware that mind reading is not really a thing that exists. Then again, I am also aware that this is not the first time Erik seems to know exactly what's going on in my head. He was pretty good at it during our dinner together. And then later, of course. In bed.

But in this house (i.e., my brain) we do not acknowledge that.

"Well," I say, "you're way bigger and way heavier. So you can't do it." Plus, I'm not sure I trust him not to leave me here. I've trusted him before and heavily regretted it.

"Neither can you, because I'm not going to let you."

I frown. "I might be able to reach the exit by myself. In which case you technically don't have to *let* me."

"If that happens, I'm going to physically prevent you from doing it."

I hate him. So much. "Listen, what if we're stuck in here for days? What if me climbing out is our only chance?"

"There is nothing to suggest that the elevator won't start up again the second the power outage is resolved. We've been in here for about thirty minutes, which is nothing, considering that the repair crew is probably working on the grid to fix a block-wide outage. Not to mention how incredibly *dangerous* what you are proposing would be."

He's right. I'm being impatient and irrational. Which flusters me. "I—only for me."

His face turns into stone. "*Only* for you?"

“You’d be safe in here. You’d just need to wait for me to call help, and __”

“You think I would be okay with you putting yourself in danger?” At baseline, Erik is not exactly a warm, convivial guy, but I had no idea he could sound like this. Deceptively calm, but furiously, icily livid. He leans forward as if to better glare at me, and his hand reaches up to close around the handrail, knuckles stretched white. I have a brief vision of him snapping it in two.

His anger, of course, gives me anger FOMO and makes me just as angry. So I lean forward, too. “I don’t see why not.”

“Really, Sadie? You don’t? You don’t fucking see why I wouldn’t be okay letting *you*, out of *all* people—” He looks away abruptly, jaw tense, a muscle ticking in his cheek. His hair, I notice, is shorter than when I touched it. And I think he might have lost a bit of weight. And I cannot, I truly *cannot* bear how handsome he is. “Would you really rather do something that idiotic and reckless than be in here with me for a few more minutes?” he asks, turning back to me, voice icy and calm again.

Of course not, I almost blurt out. I’m not some horror movie not-quite-final girl who follows the DEATH THIS WAY sign only to be flabbergasted when an ax murderer chops off her leg. I’m usually a responsible, levelheaded person—*usually* being the key word, because right now I’m kind of tempted to run into the loving, ax-wielding bosom of a serial killer. Rationally I know that Erik is right: we won’t be stuck in here for long, and someone is bound to come get us. But then I remember how betrayed and disappointed I felt in the days after he did what he did. I remember crying on the phone with Mara. Crying on the phone with Hannah. Crying on the phone with Mara *and* Hannah.

Being here with him seems just as reckless as anything else, honestly. Which is how I find myself shrugging and saying, “Kind of, yeah.”

I expect Erik to get angry again. To tell me that I’m being foolish. To make one of those dry jokes of his that made me laugh every time. Instead he takes me by surprise: He looks away guiltily. Then he presses his index and forefinger in his eyes, like he’s suddenly, overwhelmingly exhausted, and murmurs quietly, “Fuck, Sadie. I’m sorry.”

Chapter 6

Three weeks ago

I have a grand total of zero superstitious rituals centered around dating.

And I promise I'm not saying this to brag. There is a simple reason I haven't convinced myself that I need to chug down a Capri Sun or do seven jumping jacks before going out with someone, which is: I do not date. Ever. I used to, of course. Once upon a time. With Oscar, the Love of My Life.

Like Hannah often points out, it's a little misleading for me to refer to the guy who met another woman at a data science corporate bonding retreat and two weeks later called me in tears to tell me that he was falling for her as the "Love of My Life." And I swear, I do get the irony. But Oscar and I go way back. He gave me my first kiss (with tongue) when we were sophomores in high school. He was my date to the senior prom, the first nonfamily person I went on vacation with, the one whose shoulder I bawled on when he got accepted to his dream school in the Midwest, exactly seven states away from me.

We actually made it work pretty well during four years of long distance for college. And we did get to spend summers together, except when I was on internships, which was . . . well, yes, every summer but junior year, and I had that coding boot camp at UCSB then, so . . . yup, every summer. So maybe there were no summers together, but I did end up with a killer CV, and that was nice. Better, even.

When we graduated college, Oscar was offered a job in Portland, and I *was* going to follow him and find something there, but I got into Caltech's Ph.D. program, which was too good an opportunity to pass up. I really thought we could do five more years of long distance, because Oscar was a great guy and so, *so* patient and understanding—till the beginning of my third year. Till the day he FaceTimed me, crying because he'd met someone else and had no choice but to break up with me.

I wept. I stalked his new girlfriend on Instagram. I ate my weight in Talenti gelato (salted caramel truffle, black raspberry vanilla parfait, and, on

a particularly shameful night, mango sherbet melted into a pot of Midori sour; I am filled with regrets). I cut my hair short, to what my hairdresser dubbed *the longest bob in the history of bobs*. I couldn't bear to be alone, so I slept in Mara's bed for a week, because Hannah tosses around way too much and I'm pretty sure she changed the sheets twice in the five years we lived together. For about ten days I was utterly, soul-smashingly heartbroken. And then . . .

Then I was more or less fine.

Seriously, considering that Oscar and I had been together for almost a decade, my reaction to being one-sidedly broken up with was nothing short of miraculous. I aced all my classes and my lab work, spent the summer touring Europe by train with Mara and Hannah, and a couple of months later I found myself shocked to realize that I hadn't checked Oscar's girlfriend's Twitter in weeks. *Huh.*

"Could it be that it wasn't real love?" I found myself asking my friends over Midori sours (sans mango sherbet; I had regained my dignity by then).

"I think that there are lots of kinds of love," Hannah said. She was nestled next to me at our favorite booth at Joe's, the grad student bar closest to our apartment. "Maybe yours with Oscar was closer to the sibling variety than to anything resembling a passionate affair between soul mates? And you're still in touch. You know that you still love each other as friends, so your brain knows that there's no need to mourn him."

"But initially I was really, *really* devastated."

"Well, I don't want to armchair-psychologize you . . ."

"You *totally* want to armchair-psychologize me."

Hannah smiled, pleased. "Okay, if you insist. I wonder if maybe you were more devastated at the idea of losing your safe harbor—the person who was there for you since you were kids and promised to be there for you forever—than at the idea of losing Oscar himself. Could it be that he was a crutch of sorts?"

"I don't know." I poked at my garnish cherry. "I liked being his girlfriend. He was so . . . *there*, you know? And when we were apart I missed him, but not too much. It was . . . easy, I guess."

"Could it be that it was *too* easy?" Mara asked before stealing my lime.

I've been pondering her question ever since.

But there hasn't been anyone after Oscar. Which means that he still technically retains the title of Love of My Life, even if two months ago I

got an invite to his wedding—pretty glaring clue that I'm not the Love of His. I could have gotten out more, I guess, especially in grad school. I could have tried harder. "When one door shuts, another opens," Hannah and Mara would say. "Now you can date around. You missed out on so many hot dudes in the past few years—remember the guy we met in Tucson? Or the one who always asks you out at conferences? Oh my God, the guy in fluid dynamics who was clearly in love with you? You should hit him up!"

Of course, whenever the topic of my love life comes up, and because dragging is a sacrosanct part of the covenant of friendship, I never hesitate to point out that even though both Hannah and Mara have been mostly single ever since starting grad school, they barely take advantage of their amazing dating opportunities. It usually ends with Mara defensively muttering that she's busy, and Hannah rebutting that she's on a break from hooking up with people, because her last two fuck buddies were Can I Jizz in Your Hair and Human Skull on the Nightstand Girl, and they would put anyone off sex. It usually ends with us collectively deciding that no relationship could ever compete with our jobs, guinea pigs, or . . . Netflix, maybe? If the idea of staring at blueprints is more appealing to me than hitting the club (whatever that even means; what even *is* a club, really?) then maybe I should just hang out with the blueprints. Not that things cannot change, since Mara is now embarrassingly, fantastically in love with her Formerly Asshole Roommate.

Maybe the blueprints and I will common law–tie the knot. Who's to say?

Anyhoo. All of this to say: I haven't really dated a whole lot, which is the sole reason I haven't developed weird, ritualist habits around the process. Or, I *hadn't*. Till right now.

Because I am about fifteen minutes into the night, and I'm thinking that I'll have to keep these black jeans for the rest of my life. The lightweight green sweater I put on? Can't throw it away. Ever. This is now my lucky-date outfit. Because the second we sit down at the bistro, where everything smells delicious and our narrow window table has the cutest little succulent in its center, Erik's phone pings.

"Sorry. I'll mute it." He does, but not before rolling his eyes. Which is such a far cry from his usual stoic, nonplussed vibe, I cannot help but burst into laughter. "Please, do not mock my pain," he deadpans, taking the seat across from mine. I'm not sure how, but I know that he's joking. Maybe I'm developing telepathic powers.

“Work?” I ask.

“I wish.” He shakes his head, resigned. “Way more important stuff.”

Oh. Maybe he wasn’t joking. “Is everything okay?”

“No.” He slides his phone in his pocket and leans back in his seat. “My brother texted that my football team just traded one of our best players. We’re never going to win a game again.”

I smile into my water. I never really got into American football. It seems kind of boring—a bunch of overgrown dudes standing around in ’80s shoulder pads and bashing their heads toward chronic traumatic encephalopathy—but I’m way too soccer mad to judge fans of other sports. Maybe Erik used to play. He’s big enough, I guess. “Then they should really invest in lucky underwear.”

He gives me a lingering look. “Purple.”

“Lavender.”

“Right. Yes.” He glances away, and I think that this is nice. I’m sitting across from someone who’s not Oscar, and I’m not feeling too nervous, or too much weirder than usual. For all that he’s a blond steely mountain of muscles, Erik is surprisingly easy to be around.

“What’s your team? Giants? Jets?”

He shakes his head. “It’s not that kind of football.”

I cock my head. “Is it, like, a minor league?”

“No, it’s European football. Soccer, you’d call it. But we don’t need to talk about—”

I nearly do a spit take. “You follow soccer?”

“An intervention-worthy amount, according to my family and friends. But don’t worry, I do have other topics of conversation. Like pastries. Or the practical implementation of smart factory technology. Or . . . that’s about it.”

“No! No, I—” I don’t even know where to start. “I *love* soccer. Like, love *love*. I stay up till ridiculous hours to watch games in Europe. My parents always get me fancy jerseys for my birthday because that’s literally my only interest. I went to college on a soccer scholarship.”

He frowns. “So did I.”

“No way.” We stare at each other for a long moment, a million and one words running through the eye contact. *Impossible. Amazing. Really? Really, for real?* “You used to play?”

“I still play. Tuesday nights and weekends, mostly. There are lots of amateur clubs here.”

“I know! On Wednesdays I go to this gym near my place, and . . . Soccer was my first career choice. The engineering Ph.D. was definitely my plan B. I really, *really* wanted to go pro.”

“But?”

“I wasn’t quite good enough.”

He nods. “I’d have loved to go pro, too.”

“What stopped you?”

He chuckles. It sounds like a hug. “I wasn’t *nearly* good enough.”

I laugh. “So, what’s your team and who did they trade?”

“F.C. Copenhagen. And they got rid of—”

“Don’t say Halvorsen.”

He closes his eyes. “Halvorsen.”

I wince. “Yeah, you’re never gonna win another game, not for all the purple underwear in the world. But you weren’t gonna win much *with* him, anyway. You need a better coach, honestly. No offense.”

“Plenty of offense.” He’s glaring.

“You follow women’s soccer, too?” I ask.

He nods. “Proud OL Reign supporter since 2012.”

“Me, too!” I beam. “So you don’t *always* have terrible taste.”

“What’s *your* men’s team?” A cute, charming vertical line has appeared between his brows.

I rest my chin on my hands. “Guess. I’ll give you three tries.”

“Honestly, I can accept any club except for Real Madrid.”

I continue with my chin hands, unperturbed.

“It’s Real Madrid, isn’t it?”

“Yup.”

“Outrageous.”

“You’re just jelly because *we* can afford to buy decent players.”

“Right.” He sighs and hands me one of the menus I never even noticed the waiter dropped off. “I’m going to need food for this conversation. And so will you.”

We spend the rest of the night arguing, and it’s . . . fantastic. The best. I suspect the food is as good as he promised, but I don’t pay very much attention, because Erik has incredibly incorrect opinions on the way

Orlando Pride is using Alex Morgan and on the Premier League trajectory of Liverpool, and I must dedicate all my efforts to talking him out of them.

I fail. He stands by his wrong ideas and systematically makes his way through the bread, then an appetizer, then an entrée, like a man who is used to comfortably consuming seven large meals a day. At the end, when our plates are clean and I'm too full to bicker with him over the offside sanctions rules, we both lean back in our chairs and are silent for a moment.

I'm smiling. He's . . . not smiling, but close, and it makes me smile even more.

I think this might have been the most fun I've had in years. Okay, false: I *know* it is.

"How did it go, by the way?" he asks quietly.

"What?"

"Your pitch."

"Oh. Good, I think."

"Thanks to Faye's croissant?"

I grin. "Undoubtedly. And my lavender underwear."

He lowers his eyes and clears his throat. "Who's the client?"

"A cooperative. They're building a rec center based in New Jersey and are shopping around for consultants. It's a second location for them, so they bought an old grocery store to turn into a gym of sorts. They're looking for someone who'll help them design it."

"You?"

"And my boss, yes. Though two of her kids have been colicky, so for now mostly me."

"What did you tell them?"

"I talked them through my plans for energy independence, green building standards, smart water management, minimizing off-gas chemicals . . . that stuff. They were going for a green edge, they said."

"And what are your plans?"

I hesitate. I really don't want to bore Erik, and I've gotten feedback from . . . literally *everyone* that when I start talking about engineering stuff, I go on for way too long. But Erik seems more than a little interested, and even though I blabber about raw materials and federal limits and life-cycle assessment for over ten minutes, his attention never seems to waver. He just nods pensively, like he's filing away the information, and asks lots of clever questions.

“So you got the project?”

I shrug. “They’re meeting with someone else tomorrow, so I don’t know yet. But they said we’re their first choice so far, so I’m optimistic.”

Erik doesn’t reply. Instead he just studies me, serious, intent, like I’m a particularly intriguing blueprint. Does it make me uncomfortable? I don’t know. It should. I’m out with a guy. For the first time in a million years. And he’s staring. Yikes, right? But . . . I kind of don’t mind.

Mostly, I’m wondering whether he likes what he sees, which is a bit different. I feel, sometimes, like I’ve lost the habit to wonder whether I’m pretty in favor of agonizing over other qualities. Do I look professional? Smart? Organized? Someone who should be taken seriously, whatever the hell that means? I generally find the idea of men commenting on my attractiveness, favorably or otherwise, repulsive. But tonight, right now . . . the possibility that Erik might find me beautiful uncurls warmly at the base of my stomach.

And then freezes when I consider that he might be staring for the opposite reason. Could he be staring for the opposite reason? Okay. This is—no. I need to stop with the ruminating. “What are you thinking?” I ask.

He huffs a laugh. “Just wondering something.”

“What?”

He drums his fingers on the table. “Whether you want a job.”

“Oh, I still have one. Despite my efforts this morning, I didn’t actually get fired.”

“I know. And this is very inappropriate, I am aware. But I’d love to poach you.”

“Ah. I . . .” Suddenly, I’m feeling hot and weirdly tingly. “I like my job. It pays okay. And my boss is great.”

“I’ll pay you more. Name a figure.”

“I . . . what?”

“And if there’s anything you don’t enjoy about your current job, I’d be happy to come to an agreement about your duties. I’m very open to negotiating.”

“Wait—*you*?”

“ProBld,” he amends.

I frown. He talks about ProBld like he has a lot of say in their administrative choices, and I wonder if he has a managerial position. It would explain the suit. And the fact that he clearly came to dinner directly

from work, even though we met at eight. He's wearing the same clothes as this morning, albeit without his tie and jacket, and with the sleeves of his button-down rolled up to his forearms. Which look strong and oddly *male*, and I've been trying hard not to ogle. I'm about to ask what exactly his job description is, but I get distracted when the waiter brings the check and hands it to Erik. Who readily accepts it.

Is he paying? I guess he's paying. Should I politely insist that we split? Should I rudely insist that we split? Should I offer to pay for both of us? He did buy the croissant this morning. How does one dine out with company? I have no clue.

"Thank you," the waiter says before leaving. "Always nice to see you, Erik."

"You *do* come here a lot," I tell him.

He shrugs, slipping his credit card inside the book. Okay. The paying ship has sailed. *Crap.* "With big clients, mostly."

"So it's not your default date place?" The question comes out before I can turn the words in my head. Which means that I don't realize its implications until well after it's lingering between us. Erik is staring, *again*, and I'm suddenly flustered. "I don't know if . . . if you don't . . . I didn't mean to say that this is a *date*."

His eyebrow lifts.

"I mean—maybe you just wanted to . . . as friends, and . . ."

The eyebrow lifts higher.

I clear my throat. "I . . . *Is* this a date?" I ask, my voice small, suddenly insecure.

"I don't know," he says carefully, after mulling it over for a second.

"Maybe it isn't. I . . ." *I didn't want to make it weird. Maybe you just think I'm a nice girl and wanted someone to have dinner with and I totally misread the situation and I'm so, so sorry. It's just, I think I like you a lot? More than I can remember liking anyone? It's possible that I projected and*
—

The waiter comes to pick up the check, which interrupts my spiraling and gives me a chance to take a deep breath. It's all good. So maybe it wasn't a date. It's fine. It was fun, anyway. Good food. Good soccer talk. I made a friend.

"Can I ask *you* a question?"

I look up from the hand-wringing currently going on in my lap. *Is it whether I'm a needy, dangerous stalker?* "Uh, sure."

"I don't know if this is a date," he says, serious, "but if it isn't, will you go on one with me?"

I smile so wide, my cheeks nearly hurt.

• • •

The pistachio gelato melts down my cone while I explain why Neuer is a much better goalkeeper than he's made out to be. We walk around Tribeca side by side without touching even once, block after block after block, the night air balmy and the lights fuzzy. My shoes are not new, but I can feel a nasty blister slowly forming on my heel. It doesn't matter, because I don't want to stop.

Neither does Erik, I don't think. Every few words I bend my neck to look up at him, and he is so handsome in his shirtsleeves and slacks, so handsome when he shakes his head at something I said, so handsome when he gestures with his large hands to describe a play, so handsome when he almost smiles and little wrinkles appear at the corners of his eyes, so handsome that sometimes I *feel* it, physically, viscerally. My pulse quickens and I cannot breathe and I'm starting to think about unnerving things. Things like *after*. I listen to him explain why Neuer is an incredibly overrated goalkeeper and laugh, genuinely loving every minute of it.

At the ice cream place, he didn't order anything. Because, he says, "I don't like to eat cold things."

"Wow. That might be the most un-Danish thing I have ever heard."

It must be a sore spot, because his eyes narrow. "Remind me to never introduce you to my brothers."

"Why?"

"Wouldn't want you to form any alliances."

"Ha. So you are a notoriously bad Dane. Do you also hate ABBA?"

He looks briefly confused. Then his expression clears. "They're Swedish."

"What about tulips—do you hate tulips?"

"That would be the Netherlands."

"Damn."

"So close, though. Want to try again? Third time's the charm."

I glare, licking what's left of the sticky pistachio off my fingers. He looks at my mouth and then away, down to his feet. I want to ask him what's wrong, but the owner of the coffee shop on the corner comes out to retrieve his sidewalk sign and I realize something.

It's late.

Very late. Really late. End-of-the-night late. We're standing in front of each other on a sidewalk, over twelve hours after meeting for the first time on . . . another sidewalk; Erik probably wants to go home. And I probably want to be with him a little longer.

"What train do you take?" I ask.

"I actually drove."

I shake my head, disapproving. "Who even drives in New York?"

"People who have to visit construction sites all over the tristate. I'll take you home," he offers, and I beam.

"Geniuses. Kind, ride-giving geniuses. Where are you parked?"

He points somewhere behind me and I nod, knowing I should turn around and begin to walk by his side again. But we seem to be a little stuck in this *here* and this *now*. Standing in front of each other. Rooted to the ground.

"I had fun tonight," I say.

He doesn't answer.

"Even though we forgot to get croissants at the bistro."

Still no answer.

"And I am seriously tempted to buy you a life-size cardboard cutout of Neuer and— Erik, are you still doing that thing where you don't talk because I'm technically not asking you a question?"

He laughs silently and my breath hitches high in my chest. "Where do you live?" he asks softly.

"Farthest reaches of Staten Island," I lie.

It's supposed to be my revenge, but he just says, "Good."

"Good?"

"Good."

I frown. "It's a toll of seventeen dollars, my friend."

He shrugs.

"One-way, Erik."

"It's fine."

"How is it fine?"

He shrugs again. "At least it'll take a while to get there."

My heart skips a beat. And then another. And then they all catch up at once, a mess of overlapping thumps, a small, wild animal caged in my chest, trying to escape.

I have no idea what I'm doing here. Not a clue. But Erik is standing right in front of me, the streetlight a soft glow behind his head, the warm spring breeze blowing softly between us, and something clicks within me.

Yes. Okay.

"Actually," I say, and even though my cheeks are burning, even though I cannot look him in the eye, even though I'm shifting on my toes and contemplating running away, this is the bravest moment of my life. Braver than moving here without Mara and Hannah. Braver than the time I megged that midfielder from the UCLA. Just *brave*. "Actually, if you don't mind, I'd rather skip Staten Island and just go to your place."

He studies me for a long moment, and I wonder if maybe he cannot quite believe what I just said, if his brain is also struggling to catch up, if maybe this feels as extraordinary to him as it does to me. Then he nods once, decided. "Very well," he says.

Before we start to walk, I see his throat bob.

Chapter 7

Present

On paper, I should be pleased.

After weeks of sometimes-murderous, often-mopey, intense rage, I finally told Erik that I'd rather take my chances and fall down an elevator shaft—*Return of the Jedi* Emperor Palpatine style—than spend one more minute with him. I told him, and from the way his lips pressed together, he really hated hearing it. Now his eyes are closed and he's leaning his head back against the wall. Which, given his reserved Nordic genes, is likely the equivalent of a regular person going on his knees and bellowing in pain.

Good. I stare at the line of his jaw and the column of his throat, forbid myself from remembering how fun it was to bite into his scratchy, unshaven skin, and think, a little savagely, *Good*. It's good that he feels bad about what he's done, because what he did *was* bad.

Really, I should be pleased. And I am, except for this heavy, twisted feeling at the bottom of my stomach, which I don't immediately recognize, but has me thinking back to something Mara said to me the evening after my night at Erik's. Hannah's end of the call had gone dark, presumably when a falling icicle severed whatever Internet cable connects Norway to the rest of the world, and it was just the two of us on the line.

"He tried to call me," I said. "And he texted me asking if we could get dinner tonight. Like nothing happened. Like I'm too stupid to realize what he did."

"The fucking audacity." Mara was incensed, her cheeks red with anger, almost as bright as her hair. "Do you want to talk to him?"

"I . . ." I wiped the tears off with the back of my hand. "No. I don't know."

"You could yell at him. Rip him a new asshole. Threaten him with a lawsuit, maybe? Is what he did illegal? If so, Liam's a lawyer. He'll represent you for free."

"Doesn't he do weird tax corporation stuff?"

“Eh. I’m sure the law’s the law.”

I laughed wetly. “Shouldn’t you ask him first?”

“Don’t worry, he seems to be physically incapable of saying no to me. Last week he let me hang up wind chimes on the porch. The question is, do you *want* to talk with Erik? Or would you rather forget about him and pretend he never existed?”

“I . . .” I thought about being with him the previous night. And then, later, about discovering what he’d done. *Could* I forget? *Could* I pretend? “I want to talk with the Erik I had dinner with. And breakfast. Before I knew what he was capable of.”

Mara nodded, sad. “You could pick up next time he calls. And confront him. Demand an explanation.”

“What if he laughs it off as something that I should have expected?”

“It’s possible that he’s trying to call you to own what he did and apologize,” she said, pensive. “But maybe that would be even worse. Because then you’d know that he knew exactly the harm he was doing but went ahead with it anyway.”

I think that’s exactly it. I think that’s why I hated Erik’s *I’m sorry*, and why I hate that he hasn’t looked at me in several minutes. It makes me wonder if he’s aware that he ruined something that could have been great out of greed. And if that’s the case, then I didn’t imagine it: the night we spent together was as special as I remember, and he still threw it into the garbage chute—*A New Hope* Princess Leia style.

“I saw Denmark won against Germany,” I say, because it’s preferable to the alternative. The silence, and my very loud thoughts.

He turns to me and exhales out a laugh. “Really, Sadie?”

“Yeah. Two—no, three nights ago.” I look down at my hand, chipping at what little is left of last week’s nail polish. “Two-one. So maybe you *did* have a point about Neuer—”

“Really?” he repeats, harsher this time. I ignore him.

“Though, if you remember, when we had ice cream I did concede that his left foot is kind of weak.”

“I do remember,” he says, a little impatient.

God. These nails of mine are just *embarrassing*. “Even then, it probably had more to do with Denmark playing exceptionally well—”

“Sadie.”

“And if you guys can sustain this level of play for a while, then . . .”

There is some rustling from his corner of the elevator. I look up just in time to see Erik squat in front of me, knees brushing against my legs, eyes pale and serious. My heart somersaults. He *does* look thinner. And maybe a bit like he hasn't been having the best sleep of his life in the past few weeks. His hair gleams golden in the emergency light, and a brief memory resurfaces, of pulling at it when he—

"Sadie."

What? I want to scream. *What more do you want?* Instead I just look back at him, feeling like the elevator has shrunk again, this time to the pocket between my eyes and his.

"It's been weeks, and . . ." He shakes his head. "Can we please talk?"

"We are talking."

"Sadie."

"I'm saying stuff. And you're saying stuff."

"Sadie—"

"Okay, fine: you were right about Neuer. Happy?"

"Not particularly, no." He looks at me in silence for several seconds. Then he says, calm and earnest: "I'm sorry."

It's the wrong thing. I feel a surge of anger travel up my spine, bigger even than when I learned about his betrayal. There is a bitter, acid flavor in my mouth when I lean forward and hiss, "I hate you."

He briefly closes his eyes, resigned. "I know."

"How *could* you do that, Erik?"

He swallows. "I had no idea."

I laugh once. "Seriously? How—how *dare* you?"

"I take full responsibility for what happened. It was my fault. I . . . I liked it, Sadie. A lot. So much so that I completely misread your signals and didn't realize that you didn't."

"Well, what you did was—" I stop abruptly. My brain screeches to a halt and finally computes Erik's words. *Liked it? Misread?* What does that even mean? "What signals?"

"That night, I . . ." He bites the inside of his cheek and seems to turn inward. "It was good. I think . . . I must have lost control."

I freeze. Something about this conversation isn't quite right. "When you said you were sorry a minute ago, what were you referring to?"

He blinks twice. "The things I did to you. In my apartment."

“No. No, that’s not . . .” My cheeks are hot and my head’s spinning. “Erik, why do you think I stopped picking up your calls?”

“Because of the way I had sex with you. I was on you all night. Asked for too much. You didn’t enjoy it.” Suddenly, he looks as confused as I feel. Like we’re both in the middle of a story that doesn’t quite make narrative sense. “Sadie. Isn’t that the reason?”

His eyes bore into mine. I press my palm against my mouth and slowly shake my head.

Chapter 8

Three weeks ago

We haven't touched all night.

Not at the restaurant. Not in the car. Not even in the elevator up to his Brooklyn Heights apartment, which is larger than mine but doesn't look it because Erik is standing in it. We've been chatting like we did over dinner, which is fun and great and kind of hilarious, but I'm starting to wonder whether when I fooled myself into believing that I was bravely hitting on Erik, he actually thought that I was inviting myself over to play the *FIFA* video game. He's going to say *Come, I want to show you something*. I'll follow him down the hallway jelly-kneed, and once I'm at the end he'll open the door of the Xbox room and I'll quietly die.

I stand in the entrance while Erik locks the door behind me, shifting awkwardly on my feet, contemplating my own mortality and the possibility of making a run for it, when I notice the cat. Perched on Erik's spotless living room table (which appears *not* to be a repository for mail piles and take-out flyers; *huh*). It's orange, round, and glowering at us.

"Hi there." I take a few steps, cautiously holding out my hand. The cat glowers harder. "Aren't you a nice little kitten?"

"He isn't." Erik is taking off his shoes and hanging his jacket behind me. "Nice, that is."

"What's his name?"

"Cat."

"Cat? Like . . . ?"

"Cat," he says, final. I decide not to press him.

"I'm not sure why, but I pegged you for more of a dog person."

"I am."

I turn and give him a puzzled look. "But you have a cat?"

"My brother does."

"Which one?" He has four. All younger. And it's clear from the way he talks about them, often and with that half-gruff, half-amused tone, that

they’re thick as thieves. My only-child, “Have this coloring book while Mommy and Daddy watch *The West Wing*” self burns with envy.

“Anders. The youngest. He graduated college and is now . . . somewhere. Wales, I believe. Discovering himself.” Erik comes to stand next to me. He and Cat glare at each other. “While I temporarily watch his cat.”

“What’s *temporarily*?”

He presses his lips together. “So far, one year and seven months.” I try to keep a straight face, I really do, but I end up smiling into my hand, and Erik’s eyes narrow at me. “The beginning of our . . . relationship was rough, but we are slowly starting to come to an agreement,” he says, just as Cat jumps off the table and pauses to hiss at Erik on his way to the kitchen. Erik snaps back with something that sounds very harsh and consonant-based, then looks at me again. “Slowly.”

“*Very* slowly.”

“Yeah.”

“Do you lock your bedroom door at night?”

“Religiously.”

“Good.”

I smile, he doesn’t, and we slip into a lull of not-quite-comfortable silence. I fill it by looking around and pretending that I’m fascinated with the map of Copenhagen that hangs on the wall. Erik does it by standing next to me and asking, “Would you like something to drink? I think I have beer. And . . .” A pause. “Milk, probably.”

I laugh softly. “Two percent?”

“Whole. And chocolate,” he admits, a little bashful. Which has me chuckling some more, Erik finally smiling, and then . . . more silence.

We’re idling between the entrance and the living room, facing each other, him studying me, me studying him studying me, and something heavy knots in my throat. I’m not sure what’s going on. I’m not sure what I expected, but the entire night was so easy, and this is not. “Did I . . . Did I misunderstand?”

He doesn’t pretend not to know exactly what I mean. “You didn’t.” He seems . . . not insecure, but cautious. Like he’s a scientist about to mix two very volatile substances together. The product might be great, but he’d better be extra sure. Wear protective equipment. Take time. “I don’t want to assume anything.”

The knot tightens. “If you have changed your—”

“That’s not it.”

I bite into my lip. “I was going to say, if you don’t want to—”

“It’s the opposite, Sadie,” he says quietly. “The exact opposite. I need to tread carefully.”

Right, then. Okay. I make a split-second decision, my second act of bravery of the evening: I step closer to him, till our feet touch through our socks, and push up to the tips of my toes.

The first thing that hits me is how good he smells. Clean, masculine, warm. All-around delicious. The second: his collarbone is the farthest I can reach, which would be kind of amusing if my ability to breathe weren’t shot all of a sudden. If I want this kiss to happen I’ll need his cooperation. Or rock-climbing equipment.

“Will you . . .” I laugh helplessly against the collar of his shirt. “Please?”

He won’t. He doesn’t. Not for the longest time, instead choosing to wrap his hand around my jaw, cup my face, stare down at me. “I think this is it,” he murmurs, thumb swiping over my cheekbone, eyes pensive, like he’s processing a momentous piece of information. My pulse races. I’m dizzy.

“I . . . What?”

“This.” His eyes are on my lips. “I don’t think I’m going anywhere from this.”

“I’m not sure I . . .”

He moves so quickly I can barely keep track. His hands close around my waist, lift me up, and a second later I’m sitting on the shelf in the entrance. The height difference between us is much less dramatic and . . .

It’s the best kiss of my life. No: it’s the best kiss *in the world*. Because of the way he presses a hand into my shoulder blade to arch me into him. Because of the scratch of his stubble against my cheeks. Because it starts slow, just his mouth on mine, and stays like that for a long time. Even when I loop my arms around his neck, even when he leans into me and pushes my thighs open to make space for himself, even when we’re flush against each other, my heart beating like a drum against his chest, it’s just his lips and mine. Close, brushing, sharing air and warmth. Achingly careful.

And then I open my mouth, and it becomes something else entirely. The soft press of our tongues. His grunt. My moan. It’s new, but also right. The scent of him. The way he holds my head in his hand. The delicious, liquid heat spreading in my belly, rising up my nerve endings. Good. It’s good, and I’m trembling, and it’s really, *really* good.

“If . . .” I start when he comes up for air, but immediately stop when he buries his face in my throat.

“This okay?” he asks before inhaling deeply against my skin, as though my Target body wash is some kind of mind-addling drug.

My “Yeah” is faint, breathless. When he bites my collarbone, I wrap my arms around his shoulders and my legs around his waist, and the pleasure of being so close slices through me like the sharpest blade.

He is hard. I can feel exactly *how* hard. He wants me to feel it, I think, because his hand slides down to my ass and pulls me into him. I squirm, twisting my hips experimentally, and he groans ruggedly into my mouth. “Be good,” he chides, stern, a little rough. He grips me tight, holds me still against him, and I unexpectedly shiver at the command in his words.

It escalates quickly. For me, at least. There is a stretch of seconds, maybe minutes, in which we just kiss and kiss and *kiss*, Erik leaning even closer and me following his lead, liquid heat flooding inside me. And then I start noticing them: the soft groans. The sharp hiss as his cock rubs against my inner thigh. The way his fingers dig hungrily into my hips, the nape of my neck, the small of my back. He alternates between clutching me to himself as tight as he can and avoiding touching me at all, hands white-knuckled against the edge of the shelf as he puts some distance between us. I think he might be trying to slow this down. Pace himself, maybe.

I think he’s not managing to, not very well.

I pull away, and his eyes slowly blink open. They’re glassy, unfocused, a nearly-black blue fixed on my lips. When he tries to lean down for another kiss, I stop him with a hand on his chest. “Bedroom?” I gasp, because he looks like he could just fuck me in hallway, and I’m afraid that I’d gladly let him. “Or if you want . . . here is . . . fine, if you—”

He cups a hand under my ass and carries me all the way down the hallway, like I’m no heavier than his cat. When he flips the light switch on, the bed is huge and unmade, and the room smells so much like him, I have to briefly close my eyes. He sets me on my feet, and I’m about to ask him if this is necessary, if we could please do this in the semi-dark, but he’s already unbuttoning his shirt, eyes fixed on me. My mouth goes dry. On second thought, light’s fine. Probably.

Erik is a mountain. A giant dome of flesh and muscles—not *GQ*-cut, ridiculously defined ones, but solid, oak-tree big, and I might have gotten absorbed into staring and catastrophically lost track of time because:

“Take off your clothes,” he says, no, *orders*, and I shiver again. There’s something about him. Something commanding. Like his first instinct is to take charge. “Sadie,” he repeats. “Take them off.”

I nod, shrug out of my jeans first, then my sweater. I’m frantically looking for the courage to continue when I hear a low, hoarse, “Not purple.”

I look up. Erik stands in front of me, naked, tall, and big and like . . . like a minor deity from some Norse pantheon, a reserved one who likes to keep to himself but would still get a couple of Baltic Sea islands named after him. He is gloriously unself-conscious about his nudity. I, on the other hand, am apparently too embarrassed to take off my white tank top *or* to glance any lower than his belly button.

Not that he seems to notice. His eyes are glassy again, staring at the way my black panties stretch around my hips like he’d like them burned into his retinas. I am tempted to put my jeans back on. “What?”

“They’re not purple.”

“I don’t . . . Oh. I went home and changed. And . . . is this considered a pitch meeting?” I still should have worn something nicer. Maybe a matching bra. Problem is, if five hours ago someone had told me I’d end up in Erik Nowak’s bedroom by the end of the day, I’d have blamed a fever dream and handed them some Advil. “And it’s not purple, it’s—”

“Lavender,” he says with the bare twitch of a smile, and then I don’t have to think much anymore because one of his thighs slides between mine and he’s walking me backward into his bed. There is a down comforter under my back, and a pretty intimidating erection I *still* cannot bring myself to look at against my stomach, and hundreds of pounds of Danishness above me. Erik is eager, and determined, and clearly experienced. He groans into my neck, then my sternum, muttering something that could be *fuck*, or *perfect*, or my name. The way he’s been thinking about this all day during meetings, *all fucking day*. His hands slide under my top and travel up: soft kneading, more groans and a few soft *fuck, Sadie, fuck*, a light pinch on my nipple and greedy bite through the fabric, and it feels perfect, scary, exhilarating, new, filthy, right, good, wet, embarrassing, exciting, fast—*all* these things, *all* at once.

Then, in the next breath, they all dissolve. Except for one: *scary*.

Erik has hooked his fingers in the elastic of my panties, taken them off. He’s kissing down my hip bones, full lips pressed into my abdomen, and I

know exactly what he's planning to do, but I cannot stop thinking that he's . . .

He is really *very* big. And his forearm is laid out across my stomach, pinning me to the bed, and I met him—shit, I met this guy *this morning*, and even though I *did* briefly google him to make sure his real name wasn't Max McMurderer, I don't know *anything* about him and he is much larger and stronger than I am *and am I even good at this* and he could do whatever he wanted with me he could make me and I feel hot I feel cold I *cannot breathe and—*

"Stop! Stop stop *stop*—"

Erik stops. Instantly. And I instantly squirm out from underneath him, dragging myself to the headboard, legs drawn up and arms around them. His eyes are on me, once again light blue, once again *seeing*. What is he going to do? What is he—

"Hey," he says, pulling back on his knees as if to give me even more space. His tone is gentle, like he's approaching skittish, injured wildlife. A good chunk of my panic melts, and . . . Oh my God. What is *wrong* with me? We were having a good time, he was being perfectly fine, and I had to go and be a fucking weirdo.

"I'm sorry. I just . . . I don't know why I'm freaking out. You're just so big, and I barely ever— I'm not used to this. Sorry."

"Hey," Erik says again. His hand reaches out to touch me. Hovers above my knee. Then he seems to think better of it and pulls it back, which makes me want to cry. I ruined this. I ruined it. "It's okay, Sadie."

"No. No, it's not. I . . . I think the problem is that I have only ever done this with my ex, and I . . ."

"I see." His face turns stony in an impersonal, scary way. "Did he hurt you?"

"No! No, Oscar would *never*. It was good. It's just he was . . . different. From you." I laugh nervously. I hope I don't burst into tears. "Not that it's bad. I mean, everybody's different. It's just that . . ."

He nods, and I think he gets it, because his expression clears up. Which in turn helps me feel a little less anxious. Like I don't need to be huddled away from him as though he's a contagious rabid animal. I take a deep breath and scoot back closer, toward the center of the bed.

"I'm sorry," I say.

"Why are you sorry?" He seems genuinely puzzled.

“I just didn’t think this would feel . . . scary. I figured I’d be way cooler. Smoother, I guess.”

“Sadie, you . . .” He exhales and reaches for me again. This time he doesn’t stop and pushes back my hair, tucking it behind my ear like he wants to see my face in full. Like he wants me to see *him*. “You don’t have to *be* any way. I didn’t bring you here so you could *perform* for me.”

I swallow against the lump in my throat. “Right. You brought me here because *I* propositioned you, and then—”

“I brought you here because I wanted to *be* with you. I’d have kept on walking around the city till dawn if that was what you wanted. So, here’s the deal: we can spend the night fucking, and I won’t lie, I’d greatly enjoy that, but we could also play Guess Who?, or you could help me give my brother’s cat his flea medication, since it’s a two-, maybe three-person job. Any of the above works.”

I really, really don’t want to tear up. Instead I let myself fall back into the bed, my head on his one pillow. “What if I wanted to play the *FIFA* video game?”

“I would ask you to leave.”

“Why?”

“Because I do not own any gaming console.”

I laugh, a little watery. “I knew you were too good to be true.”

“I used to have a Game Boy in the ’90s,” he offers. “Maybe my dad kept it.”

“Partial redemption.” We’re both smiling now, and my fear of *him* liquefies, like snow in the sun. Only to ice all over again, in another form: fear of *not having him*. “Did I fuck this up?”

“Fuck what up?”

I gesticulate in his direction, then in mine. *Us*, I want to say, but it seems premature. “This . . . this thing.”

He lies down next to me, facing me. He purposefully left a few inches between us, but of their own volition, like vines twining around tree trunks, my legs travel across the sheets and tangle loosely with his. This time the contact is not scary, only right and natural. He’s still big and different and a little awe-inducing, but he’s not on top of me, and I feel more in control. Like I could step away whenever. And I know now that he’d let me. “Maybe I can unfuck it up?” I ask hopefully.

He sighs. “Sadie, I want to tell you something, but I’m afraid you won’t like it.”

Oh no. “What is it?”

A pause. “You are a brilliant engineer who knows the Premier League stats of the past three decades off the top of your head. Physically, you are the uncanny combination of every single feature I’ve ever found attractive—no, I will *not* expand on that. And you saved me on your phone as Corporate Thor, even after I gave you my full name.”

“I wasn’t sure about the spelling and—you *saw* that?”

“Yup.” His hand comes up to cup my cheek. “This is it, Sadie. I don’t think there’s any fucking this up.”

A million hopeful fireworks explode in my head. My heart squeezes in my chest, heavy and sweet. *Okay. Okay.* “So I have not turned you off sex forever?”

He huffs out a laugh. “I doubt me not wanting to have sex with you is something we’ll ever need to worry about, Sadie.”

“Even if I’m bad at it?”

“You’re not.”

“I didn’t think so. I thought I was okay. I mean, average. But maybe—”

“Sadie.” With a hand on my waist he pulls me a little closer. Just enough for his eyes to meet mine and for my entire world to narrow to him. “Let’s take it slowly. We’ll get there,” he tells me, like he knows, he just *knows* that this is the first night of many.

“Are you sure?”

“Strong suspicion. Would you feel better if I put my clothes back on?”

I shake my head, and then, on an impulse, close the distance between us. The other kisses he led, which I loved, but with this one I’m in charge, and it’s exactly what I need. He doesn’t try to deepen it till I do. Doesn’t come closer till I shift toward him. Doesn’t try to touch me till I take his hand and set it on my hip, and even then it’s gentle, fingers skimming up and down my thigh, tracing my rib cage ridge by ridge, my spine knob by knob.

I feel myself relax. Drift away. Expand and contract and forget. Become wet and pliant, a beautiful, delicious heat spreading into my stomach. When my thigh accidentally brushes against Erik’s erection, my breath hitches and he makes a noise, deep and low in the back of his throat.

“Sorry,” he rasps, arranging me so that I’m turned away.

I stop him with a hand on his biceps. “I like this, actually.”

“You do?”

“Yeah. You?”

He exhales. “You have no idea, do you?”

“Of what?”

He doesn’t elaborate. “I’m happy to do this until sunrise.”

“Really?” I let out a laugh. “You’d be happy channeling your best high school self and making out?”

He shrugs. “I’m probably going to come at some point. But I can warn you. You don’t have to be part of it, and there’s a bathroom across the hallway.”

“No! No, I’m—” *dying of embarrassment.* “I’d like to. Be part of it, that is.” I clear my throat. “I think we should try again. What we were doing before I freaked.”

I see it play out on his face: a split second of eagerness, then a mask of bland skepticism. “I think we should wait for that. Take it slow. Go out a few more times until you get used to the fact that I’m . . . *so* big, apparently.”

I flush. “But I was thinking . . . what if I go on top? That way I won’t feel trapped?”

Erik goes still. For a moment, he stops breathing. Then he asks, “Are you sure?” His pupils are dilated.

“I think so. Would you like to?”

“That would be . . .” He swallows. His fingers are gripping my hips like he simply cannot let go. “Yeah. I’d *like* that. If that’s even the word for it.”

I don’t immediately realize the misunderstanding. Maybe because I’m busy, first shifting on the mattress and climbing over his hips, then basking in the fact that I’m on top of him. I do feel much better, this way. *Okay*, I think. *Yes*. I can do this, after all. I love this, actually. I love straddling Erik, looking down at his pale skin, tracing his muscles. I love his eyes on the spots where my nipples push against my top. I love the feeling of my thighs being split wide by his torso, the hairs of his happy trail against my folds. I *can* have sex with him, after all. I *want* to have sex with him. I might *die* if I don’t have sex with him, because right now I want us to be as close as we humanly can.

But then his hands close around my waist, and he shifts me up. And up. And up. Until my knees are pressing into the mattress on each side of his

neck, and I remember what exactly he'd been about to do when we stopped. Big light bulb energy. Oh my God. He thinks I want him to—

"Erik, I—"

He starts with a long swipe across my core, parting me with his tongue. I make an embarrassing, animal sound that's half gasp, half whimper, and fall forward, catching myself on the headboard. My core flutters. My entire body shakes, electric.

"Fuck, Sadie," he says gutturally right before licking into me again, thorough and impatient in a way that redefines the word *enthusiasm*. His tongue plays with my entrance, pushing past squeezing muscles. The thumb of the hand that's not caging my ass comes up to draw circles around my clit. I'm trembling. Spasming. Clenching. All of a sudden I'm *agonizingly* empty.

"Oh my God," I whisper into the back of my hand. Then I bite it, because if I don't, I will scream. Maybe I'll scream anyway, because he grunts and arches his throat to lick up into me, pressing my pelvis against his mouth, and the noises he makes—the noises *we* make—are wet and filthy and obscene. "Oh my *God*. I—" I'm out of control. My thighs are starting to tremble. I have no idea what I'm doing, but I cannot stop rocking, rubbing myself against his mouth, his nose, and his face, squirming for more contact, more pressure, more friction, wanting to be full—

"You're doing so well, Sadie," he murmurs into my core, and the words vibrate all the way up my spine. His fingers grip my ass bruisingly tight and he's ruthless, keeping me still, angling me better, letting me know that he knows what I need—for me to let him do his job. Then he starts using his teeth on me, and I break down.

I scream.

"Can't believe you thought you were bad at this," he tells me, laughing, and I feel each and every syllable travel through me like a knife. I force myself to breathe deep, to stay upright, to look down at him. And that's when his eyes meet mine and he starts sucking hard on my clit.

I come so hard, it's nearly painful. I've always been quiet, silent in bed, but the pleasure is like a dam bursting, cutting and searing and so violent, my body has no hope to contain it. I sob and whimper into the back of my hands, powerless, confused. All through my orgasm Erik is there, holding my hips, murmuring praises and groans against my swollen folds, licking at me until it's just on the other side of too much.

Then his kisses become lighter. Gentle. He turns to suck on the inside of my left thigh, and I wonder if it's enough to leave a mark. *Erik Nowak was here*. "I've been thinking about eating you out all day," he says against my skin, which is sticky and drenched and—I cannot believe this is happening. I cannot believe this is *sex*. "All. Fucking. Day."

Somehow, he seems to know that I'm too boneless to move. He slides me back down his body, and maybe I'm imagining, but I think he's breathing as heavily as I am, and I think his hands are trembling. I want to investigate, but he wraps his arms around my torso and holds me to his chest till we're as close and we can be. The racing beat of his heart reverberates through my skin, and this, *this*, this moment couldn't be any more perfect.

Until he kisses me. And kisses me. He kisses my mouth with the same single-mindedness he used for my core, and as my heartbeat quiets down, as my limbs slowly stop twitching with pleasure, I begin to smile into his lips.

"Erik?"

"Yeah?" His hand curves around my ass.

"Why did you buy it?"

"Buy what?"

"Faye's croissant. If you knew it was so gross, why did you buy it?"

He smiles into the line of my shoulder. "I'm part of it."

"Of what?"

"The money laundering scheme."

I giggle and hug him tighter while it swells inside me, a surge of happiness and adoration and something hazy, something hopeful and young that I cannot quite define yet. His cock twitches against my inner thigh. He shifts me higher to pretend it didn't happen and pulls me in for another lazy kiss. *Hmm.*

I try to wiggle and reach between us, but he stops my hand by twining his fingers against mine.

"Do you not—?"

"Ignore it," he says, nuzzling his face against my throat. He bites me, firm, playful, almost distracting. Almost.

"But you—"

"Shhh. It's fine, Sadie. We should quit while we're ahead."

I frown, propping myself up to look at him. "*We*'re not ahead. *I* am ahead. It's a firm one to nothing." Probably more like twelve-blending-into-

one to nothing. But.

He laughs softly. “Believe me, it did *not* feel like nothing—”

He closes his mouth so abruptly, I can hear his jaw click. Because I’m sliding back, and his erection is nestled against me. First, the curve of my ass. Then, right under my core.

He inhales, harsh. Fingers dig into my waist. “Sadie—”

“I thought you said I could be in charge,” I tease him, rocking on his cock like I did on his mouth. The lips of my core surround his shaft, plump and puffy. We look down at the scene at the same time. The sound he lets out is feral.

“We need to stop,” he grunts out, but his hand splays on my lower back and he presses down to get better friction.

“Why?”

“Because—” The head of his cock hits my swollen clit, a sharp stab of pleasure up my spine. Erik arches up, hugs me tighter to him, and closes his eyes. “Fuck. Oh, *fuck*,” he slurs. “I’m going to fuck you, am I not?” His breath catches, and we’re almost aligned. Then we *are* aligned, him hard against my entrance, and I bear down because I want to, I want to feel this delicious, immense pressure that will split me at the seams, and it feels good, so good, floodingly, druggingly, overwhelmingly good—

“Condom,” he gasps in my mouth. “If we’re—we need a condom.”

I still. *Shit*. “I—” I try to scramble off him, but Erik holds me right there. He’s still kind of inside me. Just the tip. “Do you . . . Do you have one?”

“I think so. Somewhere.”

Somewhere is right in the drawer of his bedside table, underneath a bottle of allergy pills, a phone charger, and two books in what I presume is Danish. He holds the condom out to me and I accept it without thinking.

The foil is golden. *Trojan*, it says. And underneath: *Magnum*. Which maybe explains a lot.

“Should I . . . ?”

He nods. We’re both flushed and clumsy and out of breath, *and* I have no idea how to put on a condom. But I don’t want to say, *Please, do it yourself, because my school didn’t really do the banana part of sex ed, and my mom put me on birth control on my third date with Oscar.* Erik is staring eagerly at the foil in my hand, like it’s a gift of myrrh for the newborn king, and I think he’s more than a little into the idea of me doing this for him.

I grin. I have a Ph.D. in engineering: if I can build sophisticated machinery, I can figure out how to put on a damn condom. And there's some trial and error, but Erik doesn't seem to mind, spellbound by the way my small fingers work on him. When I'm done, his breathing is shorter. More stilted.

"Come back here." He pulls me down to him.

"I— Do you want to be on top, this time?"

"No."

"Are you sure? I think I'm okay with—"

"Sadie. I want to fuck you, and I need you to like me fucking you. So you're on top for now."

I have no clue what the parameters for the magnum size are, but I do get why he needs it. I'm as relaxed and turned on as I've ever been, but it still takes a while to work him in, with small increments and false starts and lots of careful maneuvering. By the time he's in as far as he'll go, I'm sweating, and Erik is drenched. He smells delicious, like salt and soap and his immense skin. So I lick the place on his jaw where the drops have been collecting.

"Can you . . . ?" He arches experimentally into me. We both let out a groan.

"What do you want?"

"I want to feel your tits."

"Oh." I'd forgotten about my top. I straighten to take it off, which involves some twisting and grinding that has Erik gasping and trying to still my hips again. *They're not much,* I almost warn him. But I remember something he said earlier. *Uncanny combination of every single feature I've ever found attractive.* "Did you mean it? When you said I'm your type, physically?"

His pupils track the progress of my hands, blown wide. "I noticed you."

"Noticed me?" I undo the clasp of my bra. He twitches inside me. His jaw ticks with restraint.

"In the building. The lobby." He closes his eyes. Then opens them. "Once in the elevator."

I take off my bra, feeling stupid to have been worried. He's staring at my body like it's somewhere between holy and utterly, deliciously pornographic. "What did you notice?"

"Sadie." His throat bobs. "A lot."

“And . . .” I push down on my knees and circle my hips twice, working him a little deeper. A fraction of an inch, but the friction, the sense of fullness—my eyes roll back in my head. I didn’t know anything could be so far inside me and feel so good. Couldn’t have imagined. “And what did you think?”

“Oh, *fuck*.” A desperate sound comes out of Erik’s throat. “This. This, and more.” He swallows. “Lots of other things, and—Sadie, you’re going to have to give me a minute to adjust or I’m going to—” Erik sounds just as astonished by this as I feel. His eyes are screwed shut, and his hands grip me so hard, and his teeth sink into my shoulder. “Sadie, I’m about to—”

“Don’t worry.” I pant my smile against his ear, fluttering like I’m about to go under. “You’re doing so well, Erik.”

I come like an avalanche, and then he does, and when I squeeze my arms around his neck, I don’t ever mean to let go.

• • •

In the morning, I watch him shave in front of the mirror just because I can.

He uses a razor that looks like the ones I buy for my legs (i.e., cheapest at the supermarket). If he minds the bleary-eyed girl who had less than two hours of sleep and is currently sitting wrapped in a towel on his bathroom counter, he hides it well. But I’m almost sure he doesn’t. Mostly because he’s the one who put me here.

“You’re so tall,” I say, a little tired, a little stupid, leaning back against the mirror.

His mouth twitches. “You aren’t.”

“I know. That’s what I blame the end of my soccer career on.”

“Isn’t Crystal Dunn pretty short?” he asks, rinsing his razor. He dries his hands on his pajama bottoms, which hang deliciously low on his hips. “Meghan Klingenberg, too. And—”

“Shut up,” I say mildly, which only amuses him further. He sets down the razor and moves closer, hands slipping inside my towel and coming to rest against the small of my back, warm and instinctive and impossibly familiar. Like it’s something he’s been doing every day for his entire life. Like it’s something he plans to do every day for what’s left of it.

I love this. The way he pulls me into him. The way he grows hard but seems to be content with this not going anywhere. The way his face nuzzles

into my throat. I *love* this. But.

"I just think you might be *too* tall," I say into his clavicle. "I foresee neck problems for both of us."

"Hmm. We'll probably need surgery a few years down the line." His smile travels through my skin. "How's your insurance?"

"Meh."

"Mine's good. You should go on it when . . ." He trails off. Picks up again with, "Have lunch with me today."

"I don't usually have lunch," I tell him. "I'm more of a 'big breakfast, then forty snacks scattered throughout the day' kind of person."

"Have a big breakfast and forty snacks with me, then."

I laugh. Yes. Yes. *Yes.* "What's the closest subway stop?"

"I'll drive you into work."

"I need to go home first. Feed Ozzy. Remind him of my unyielding love for him."

"I'll drive you home, and then I'll drive you into work. You can introduce me to the hamster."

"Guinea pig."

"Pretty sure they're the same thing."

I laugh again, exhausted and drowsy and over the moon, and I cannot help but wonder how different this morning would be if Erik hadn't been the one to buy Faye's croissant.

I cannot help but wonder if this is the first day of the rest of my life.

Chapter 9

Present

"I don't . . . It's not that . . . It isn't even . . . If you . . ." I'm sputtering like an idiot, which . . . great. Fantastic. Empowering. I'm a role model for all jilted women in the world.

Erik is still crouching in front of me, like he's fully planning to see this conversation through. I sit up, straightening against the wall of the elevator, and take a deep breath. Collect myself.

I'm going to speak my mind. I'm going to tell him exactly how much of a dickhead he is. I'm going to unleash three weeks' worth of shower-crying on him. I'm going to chew him out for ruining pistachio ice cream and orange cats for me. I'm going to *annihilate* him.

But apparently, only after I ask him the stupidest question in the history of stupid questions. "Did you really think the sex wasn't good?"

Wow, Sadie. Way to let the point of this entire chat fly over your head.

He snorts. "*I* obviously didn't."

"Then why would you say that—"

"Sadie." He studies me for a moment. "Are you for real?"

I blush. "You're the one who brought it up."

"Seriously? You know what—okay. Right. Well." His throat works. He looks . . . not quite upset, but definitely the most upset I've ever seen him. Danish-upset, maybe. "About three weeks ago I'm having my usual, fairly disgusting breakfast, and I meet this really beautiful, amazing woman. I blow off my morning meetings and ignore my phone—my team is *this* close to sending out a search party—because all I can think of is how fun it would be to sit with her on a park bench covered in bird shit and talk about . . . I don't even know. It doesn't even matter. That's how good it is with her. And because it's apparently my lucky day, I manage to convince her to come out to dinner with me, and she's not only lovely and smart and funny, it also feels like the two of us have more things in common than I thought possible, and . . . well, it's a first for me. I'm no relationship expert, but I

recognize how rare this is. How utterly one of a kind. I want to take it slow because the idea of screwing this up terrifies me, but she asks to come over." He exhales a single, bitter laugh.

"I should put on the brakes, but I have zero self-control when it comes to her, so I say yes. We spend a night together, and we fuck, a lot, and *yes*, Sadie, it's really fucking phenomenal in a life-altering way I never thought I'd need to elaborate on. It's obvious that she doesn't do this often, there's some hiccups, but . . . yeah. You were there. You know." He presses his lips together and looks away. "She falls asleep and I watch her and think, *This is like nothing else. Scary, almost.*

"But then it's morning and she's still there. And when I say good-bye to her she actually runs after me and we're at work, there's people around, we can't really kiss or do anything like that, but she reaches out and takes my hand and squeezes it hard. And I think that maybe I don't need to be scared. It's going to be all right. She's not going anywhere." He turns back to me. His eyes are cold now, dark in the yellow lights. "And then night comes. The following day. The one after. And I don't hear from her. Never again."

I stare at Erik for long moments, absorbing every single word, every little pause, every unspoken meaning. Then I lean forward, and through gritted teeth I say:

"I despise you."

"Why?" He is icily, quietly furious, but I'm not afraid of him. I just want him to hurt. To hurt as much as he hurt me.

"Because you are *a liar*."

"Am I?"

"Of the worst kind."

"Right. Of course." Our faces are about an inch apart. I can smell his scent, and I hate him even more. "And what did I lie about?"

"Come on, Erik. You know exactly what you did."

"I thought I did, but apparently I don't. Why don't you spell it out for me?"

"Sure." I abruptly pull away, leaning back against the wall and crossing my arms on my chest. "Fine. Let's talk about how you used me to steal clients from GreenFrame."

Chapter 10

Two weeks, six days ago

"Did I just see you with Erik Nowak?"

Gianna's voice startles me out of the semi-comatose state I've been in for the past five minutes, which mostly involves staring at the Megan Rapinoe Funko Pop on my desk and . . . mooning.

I feel drugged in a sweet, delicious way. From lack of sleep, I assume. And the fluffy, syrupy waffle Erik bought me at the diner near my apartment. And the hilarious story he told me while sipping his coffee, of how two weeks ago he fell asleep on his couch and woke up to Cat licking his armpit.

I want to text him. I want to call him. I want to take the elevator and go downstairs to smell him. But I'm not going to. I'm not *that* weird. Overtly, at least.

"Glad to see you're back." I smile up at Gianna, who's leaning against my desk. She must have come into my office while I was mooning. "How's Presley?"

"Better. But now Evan and Riley have some kind of bug that involves a superfun amount of diarrhea. But I saw you in the lobby with a tall guy—was he Erik Nowak?"

"Oh. Um . . ." I think maybe I'm flushing. I don't really have a reason to—Gianna is cool and very much not the judgmental type—but what happened last night feels so . . . private. And fledgling. I haven't even told Hannah and Mara (if one doesn't count the eggplant and heart emojis I sent in response to the seventy How did it go? texts I found this morning on my phone). It feels weird to talk about it with my boss. Though lying about it would be even weirder, right? "Yes. You know him?"

"*That* Erik Nowak? ProBld's Erik Nowak?"

I cock my head. Are there any others? "Yeah?"

"Are you guys friends?"

"We only just met."

“So you’re not like, *buddies*.” She seems relieved. “Okay. Good. You were laughing together, so I just wanted to make sure.”

“Why . . . Would it be a problem if we were?”

“Not quite, no. I mean, I wouldn’t dream of telling you who you should and shouldn’t hang out with. But the two of you seemed a bit . . . chummy, and I just wanted to make sure . . . you know.” She waves a hand dismissively. “If you *were* friends and talked regularly, I’d want to remind you to be safe and very, *very* discreet when talking shop with him. But since you’re just casual acquaintances, then—”

“Why would I . . .” I frown, swiveling my chair to better face her. This conversation is very odd, and I’m wondering if I should chug down another coffee before it continues. “What do you mean by *safe* and *discreet*?”

She opens her mouth. Then closes it, looks around to make sure that none of the interns are here, and opens it again. “A while ago ProBld made me an offer. Basically, they wanted to buy GreenFrame and its client portfolio, and sort of incorporate it as a division of their company.”

“Oh.” I blink. Erik didn’t mention it last night. Then again, neither has Gianna, ever. “I had no idea.”

“Well, it was before I hired you. Two, three years ago? Before the kids. And to be honest, it wasn’t the first nor the last offer I got.”

“Right. I knew Innovus offered.”

“And JKC. Yeah. But ProBld was kind of . . . insistent.” She rolls her eyes. “The reason they wanted us on board is that they’re trying really hard to expand in the ecologically sustainable market, but they haven’t had much success luring in really qualified people like . . . well, like you. Since most of them would rather go to more specialized firms. Don’t get me wrong, they’ve been hiring some promising engineers, but they don’t have the expertise they need yet. So they made me a really good offer, I said no, thank you, I would rather be my own boss, and for a few months it looked like everything was going to continue as usual.” She pauses. “Then it started.”

I shake my head, confused. “What started?”

“A bunch of shitty little things. The worst of which was targeting some of our clients to get them to switch to ProBld. I heard that some of their people were sniffing around our sites, too. Not exactly upstanding stuff.”

I stiffen. This sounds . . . bad. Real bad. “Gianna, just to be clear.” I take a deep breath. “Last night I went out with Erik for dinner. So we . . . I guess

we *are* chummy. But he's great, and he wouldn't do anything like what you mentioned." I say it with more certainty than I should probably feel, given that I first met him exactly twenty-four hours ago. But it's *Erik*. I trust him. "I don't know what the partners and the higher-ups are doing at ProBld, but I'm sure he'd never condone anything like that."

"Well, he *is* a partner."

I blink. "He . . . Excuse me?"

"Erik is one of the partners."

All of a sudden I'm feeling cold. And very, very nauseous. "He is a—What are you talking about?"

"You said you went to dinner with him. Are you telling me he didn't mention that he's one of the founding partners?" She must read the answer on my face, because her expression shifts to something that looks a lot like pity. "He started ProBld right out of school with two of his buddies. And the rest is history."

"I'd love to poach you . . . I'll pay you more. Name a figure . . . I'm very open to negotiating."

*"Wait—*you*?"*

"ProBld."

"Does he know you're an engineer?" Gianna is asking.

I clear my throat. "Yes. I told him I worked for GreenFrame."

"Before or after he asked you out?"

"I . . ." That wasn't the reason. It wasn't. Can't have been. "Before."

"Oh, Sadie." Same tone as before—now with more pity. "But you didn't tell him anything specific about our projects or strategies or clients, right?"

"I . . ." I massage my forehead, which suddenly feels like it's about a second from exploding. "I don't think so."

"Did he ask about anything?"

"No, he . . ."

Yes. Yes, he did.

I can clearly see him, sitting across from me at the restaurant. His almost-smile. His neat, voracious way of eating.

How did it go, by the way? . . . Your pitch.

Who's the client?

So you got the project?

"Sadie? Are you okay?"

No. No. Nope. “I think . . . I’m afraid I mentioned something. About the Milton project. It came up in conversation, and I . . . I knew he was an engineer so I went into more detail than I should have, and . . .” Gianna covers her eyes with her hand, and I want the floor to swallow me whole. The addled, blissed-out feeling from this morning has dissolved, replaced with dread and a strong desire to puke my waffle all over the floor. “Gianna, I know it seems sketchy, but I don’t think Erik would ever do anything like what you mentioned. We really hit it off last night, and . . .” My voice dies down, which is just as well. I cannot bear to hear myself talking anymore.

He didn’t say he was a partner. Why didn’t he? Why do I feel dizzy?

“I hope you’re right,” Gianna says, even more of that unsettling compassion in her eyes. She pushes away from my desk, high heels clicking into her office, and doesn’t look back.

I feel like I could cry. And I also feel like this is a stupid, nonsensical misunderstanding I’m going to laugh about. I have no idea which one is the right thing to do, so I try to focus on work, but I’m too tired, or preoccupied, or horrified to concentrate. At two P.M. Erik texts me: In meetings until 7. Can I take you out after? and I think about our dinner last night, in a restaurant where he usually brings clients. Am I work to him?

Two minutes later he adds, Or I could cook for you.

And then: Before you ask: no, not herring.

I stare at the messages for a long time, and then I stand to take a look at the copy machine, which has been beeping because of its usual paper jam. I ball up the offending sheet and throw it in the recycling bin, not quite seeing what’s in front of me.

I answer emails. I call one architect. I smile at the interns and have them help me with research. I wait for . . . I don’t know what I’m waiting for. A sign. For this weird, apocalyptic confusion to dissipate. Come on, Erik didn’t go out with me as a cover for some sort of . . . corporate espionage bullshit, or whatever. This is not a John Grisham book, and what I told Gianna stands: my gut tells me that he would never, ever do anything like it. Unfortunately, I’m not positive my gut isn’t lying to me. I think it might just want to make out with the most attractive man in the world during the halftime of soccer games.

The copy machine beeps three times, and then three more. Apparently, I fixed absolutely nothing.

At five thirty I hear Gianna’s phone ring, and ten minutes later she walks gingerly out of her office, coming to stand in front of my desk. The interns are gone. It’s just her and me in the office.

My insides are iced over. My stomach plummets.

“Guess what project we didn’t get,” she says. Her tone is soft. Gentle. To her credit, not a trace of I Told You So. “And guess what other firm they decided to go with.”

I close my eyes. I cannot believe this. I don’t want to believe this.

“The Milton people said they got another pitch today. Similar sustainability. Lower costs, though, since it’s a bigger firm. They asked me if I could match their offer, and I told them I couldn’t.”

My eyes stay closed. I don’t open them for a long, long time. Everything is spinning. I’m just trying to stay still. “I . . . I fucked up,” I say, barely a whisper. I’m crying. Of course I’m crying. I’m fucking stupid and my fucking heart is broken and of fucking course I’m fucking crying.

“You couldn’t have known, Sadie.”

The copy machine beeps again, six times in a row. I nod at Gianna, watch her walk away, and think about broken things, broken things that sometimes cannot be fixed.

Chapter 11

Present

I rack my brain, trying to remember whether during our dinner Erik ever mentioned taking acting classes. I want to say no, and let's be honest, it would seem a tiny bit out of character. And yet, if I didn't know what he did, I could almost buy it. I could almost believe, from the way he's blinking confusedly at me, that he has no idea what I'm talking about.

Nice try.

"Come on, Erik."

His brow furrows. He's still crouching in front of me. "What clients?"

"You can drop it."

"What clients?"

"We both know that—"

"What. Clients."

I press my lips together. "Milton."

He shakes his head, like the name tells him nothing. If I had a knife handy I'd probably stab him. Through the muscles, right into his heart. "The rec center in New Jersey."

It takes a second, but I can see a glimmer of recognition. "The pitch? The one you were at Faye's for?"

"Yup."

"You signed that client, didn't you?"

I clench my jaw. Hard. "Fuck you, Erik."

He huffs impatiently. "Sadie, I'm really lost here, so if you don't give me a little context—"

"I *almost* signed that client. However, when they got a pitch that was almost identical to mine, they decided to go with ProBld. Ring a bell?"

It doesn't. Well, I am *positive* it must. But the acting talent is making a sudden comeback, and Erik really does look like he's completely, utterly confused. His eyes narrow, and I can almost see him try to sift through his memories.

I sigh. “This is . . . just really exhausting, Erik. Gianna told me everything. I know that ProBld tried to buy GreenFrame. I don’t know if you went out with me planning to hurt the company, or you took the opportunity once you were presented with it, but I *do* know that you used what I told you at dinner to give a pitch very similar to mine, because the client—*your* client—admitted it to us.”

“I didn’t.”

“Right. Sure.”

“I *really* didn’t.”

“Of course.” I roll my eyes.

“No, I’m serious. Are you telling me that the reason you stopped talking to me is that we coincidentally ended up getting one of your clients?”

“Two pitches that similar are *not* a coincidence—”

“They must be. I didn’t even know we *had* that client until right now.”

“How could you not know what projects are going in the firm *you* own?”

“Because I am *not* a junior employee.” I can tell from his tone that he’s starting to get frustrated with me. Which is fine because I’ve been frustrated with him for weeks. “I have a leadership position and manage people who manage people who manage *more* people. We’re not GreenFrame, Sadie. I oversee different teams and spend my days in pretty fucking boring meetings with patent attorneys and surveyors and quality assurance managers. Unless it’s a high-priority deal or an extremely lucrative project, I might not even be debriefed until it’s well on its way. My job is making big-picture decisions and giving guidelines so that—”

He stops and physically recoils. One second he’s leaning toward me, the next his back is straight and he’s pinching the bridge of his nose between thumb and forefinger. He stays like that for long seconds, eyes closed, and then explodes in a low, heartfelt:

“Fuck.”

It’s my turn to be confused. “What?”

“Fuck.”

“What . . . Why are you doing that?”

He looks at me, not one ounce of his previous exasperation in his expression. “You’re right.”

“About?”

“It was me. It was my fault you didn’t get the client. But not for the reason you think.”

“What?”

“The day after we . . .” He runs a tired hand down his face. “That morning I had a meeting with one of the engineering managers I supervise. He told me that he was refining a pitch for a project that had specifically asked for sustainability features. He didn’t go into detail and I didn’t ask, but since it’s not our forte he wanted to know if I had any resources. I sent him an academic article.” His throat bobs. “It was the one you wrote.”

I’m dizzy. I’m sitting down, but I think I might fall over. “My article? My peer-reviewed article on frameworks for sustainable engineering?”

He nods slowly. Helplessly. “I also sent your thesis out in a company-wide email and highly encouraged all team leaders to read it. Though that was a few days later, after I’d read it myself.”

“My thesis?” I must have misheard him. Surely I’m in the thick of a cerebrovascular event. “My *doctoral dissertation*?”

He nods, looking apologetic. I . . . I don’t think I’m even mad anymore. Or maybe I am, but it’s diluted in the total, utter shock of hearing that . . . “How did you get my thesis? And my paper?”

“The paper was on Google Scholar. For the thesis . . .” He presses his lips together. “I had a librarian from Caltech send me a download link.”

“You had a librarian send you a download link,” I repeat slowly. I’m inhabiting a parallel dimension. Where atoms are made of chaos. “When?”

“The morning after. When I got to my office.”

“Why?”

“Because I wanted to read it.”

“But . . . why?”

He looks at me like I’m a bit slow. “Because you wrote it.”

Maybe I *am* a bit slow. “So you were trying to . . . figure out GreenFrame’s pitch based on my published work?”

“No.” His tone drops some of the guilt and is back to three parts firm, one part indignant. “I wanted to read what you wrote because I’m interested in the topic, because at dinner it was very obvious that you’re a better engineer than most people at ProBld—including myself—and because about five minutes into my workday I realized that if I wasn’t going to stop thinking about you, I might as well be productive about it. And as I read, I realized that your work is above good, and sharing it with everyone else seemed like a no-brainer. I didn’t think that I was handing your pitch to my entire company, and . . . Fuck. I just didn’t think.” He rubs the back of his

hand against his mouth. “It was my fault. It wasn’t on purpose, but I take full responsibility. I’m going to talk with my engineering manager and with the client and . . . I’ll figure this out. We’ll find you a way to make sure you get the credit you deserve.”

I stare at him, stupefied. This is . . . He’s not supposed to be saying any of this. He’s supposed to . . . I don’t know. Double down. Defend his own shitty actions. Make me loathe him even more.

“For the future, we can probably work out an agreement. Something about not pursuing your potential clients. I don’t know, but I’ll talk it through with Gianna.”

Excuse me? “I doubt your partners will ever agree to that.”

“They will when I explain the situation to them,” he says, like it’s a decided matter.

“Sure, because you’re one of them.” My anger is back. Good. Perfect. “*Another* lie from you, by the way.”

This time, he . . . Is he *blushing*? “I didn’t lie.”

“You just omitted. Nice loophole.”

“That’s not it. I . . .” For the first time since I met him, this self-possessed, severe man seems vaguely embarrassed, and I . . . I can’t look away. “I wasn’t sure whether you knew. Most people I meet seem to know already—yes, I know how that sounds. And then over dinner you told me about how different working for a firm was from academic life. How much you missed your friends. I figured me bragging about how I graduated and got to make that transition with *my* friends could wait a couple of days.”

“That sounds really . . .” Believable, actually. Kind of thoughtful, if in an oddly misplaced way? “Sketchy.”

He lets out a laugh. Like I’m being ridiculous. “Sketchy.”

“I just—” I throw up my hands. “Why are we even doing this, Erik? It’s obvious that you had some ulterior motive for asking me out. You even tried to offer me a job!”

“Of course I did, Sadie. I’d do it again. I will right now. Do you want to come work for me? Because that offer stands and—”

“*Stop*.” I raise my palm, put it between us like the most useless wall in the world. “Please, just . . . stop this.”

“Okay.” Erik takes a long, deep breath. When he talks, his voice is calm. “Okay. This is what happened, and interrupt me if I’m wrong: you thought, based on what you were told by someone you trusted, that I slept with you

to steal a client and get back at Gianna for not selling, which maybe sounds a little far-fetched, but . . . I get it. It's where the clues pointed. Is that correct?"

I nod, silent. There is a prickly, heavy pressure behind my eyes.

"Okay," he continues patiently. "That's your side of what happened. But I'm asking you to consider mine. Which is that even though I absolutely fucked up by sending your work to my team, I didn't know about the consequences of it until about five minutes ago. Because I called you, but you never picked up. And when I came upstairs to talk to you, Gianna said that she was sure you didn't want to see me. And I like to think that I'm not the kind of asshole who would keep calling a woman who asked him not to, so I stopped. But I also wasn't exactly able to quit thinking about you, which had me desperately looking for the reason you pulled back, to the point that I've been replaying what happened between us that night every day—every . . . single . . . day—for the past three weeks."

"Erik—"

"I'm not exaggerating." This would be so much easier if his tone were accusatory. But no. He has to sound reasonable and logical and earnest and sincere and I want to scream. "I tore apart every minute, every second of every interaction, and after slicing all of it into pieces, the only conclusion that I could reach was that whatever I did wrong must have happened after you asked me to take you to my place, which only really left what we did there."

"That's not—"

"And I've been scared, scared like never before, that I'd hurt you." He lifts his hand. Curves it around my cheek. "That I'd left you in some—*any* kind of pain. That I couldn't make amends. Which, let me tell you, is no fun when you know in your lizard brain that you're about five minutes from falling in love with someone." He closes his eyes. "Maybe past. Can't really tell."

They make the floor shift and shake, Erik's words. They make it fall hard and fast from under my feet, they flood my brain with a blinding flash of light, and they . . . wait.

Wait.

"The power's back," I say with a gasp, realizing that the elevator is working again. Erik must have noticed, too, but he doesn't look surprised, nor does he make a move to shift away from me. He keeps holding my

eyes, like he's waiting for an answer from me, for an acknowledgment of what he's said, but I can't, *won't* give it to him. I turn away from the hand on my face and grab my bag, slipping out of the corner where I wedged myself.

"Sadie." When the doors open on the first floor, I dart out of the car. Erik is right behind me. "Sadie, can you—"

"Erik!" someone calls from the other side of the lobby, the voice echoing across the marble. There is a small group of people chatting with two men in maintenance uniforms. "You okay?" I'm almost positive (from hate-researching ProBld after our falling-out) that he's another one of the partners. A late-working bunch, clearly.

"Yeah," Erik says without moving in their direction.

"Were you stuck in the elevator?"

"In the smaller one." There is an impatient edge to Erik's tone. It shifts to something much softer when he turns to me and says, "Sadie, let's—"

"Was it just the two of you?" the man calls. "Actually, maintenance is trying to make sure that no one from ProBld is still stuck. Can you come here for a second?"

Erik's "Sure, I'll be right there" could cut diamonds.

I turn to leave, but his hand closes around my biceps, and I feel his grip travel through every single nerve ending I possess. "Stay here, okay? I just need five minutes to talk to you. Can I have five minutes? Please?" He holds my eyes until I nod.

But once he turns his back to me, I don't hesitate for even a second. I rub the spot where he just touched me until I can't feel him anymore, and then I slip out into the warm night air.

Chapter 12

“Wait. Wait wait wait wait wait. Wait wait wait. Wait.” In the center of my Mac’s monitor, Mara holds up both index fingers to command Hannah’s and my attention. Despite the fact that she already had it. “Wait. What you’re saying is that all this time we’ve been doing weekly summoning circles to give this guy disfiguring genital warts and toenail funguses and those giant subcutaneous pimples people get surgically removed on YouTube . . . but he did *not*, in fact, deserve any of it?”

I groan. “No. I don’t know. Yes. Maybe?”

“Related question: how long were you in that elevator?” Hannah asks.

“I’m not sure. One hour? Less? Why?”

She shrugs. “Just wondering if this could be Stockholm syndrome.”

I groan again, letting myself fall back on my bed. Ozzy shuffles over to sniff me, just to make sure that I haven’t turned into a cucumber since the last time he checked. Then he scurries away, disappointed.

“Okay,” Mara says, “let’s backtrack. Is what he told you believable?”

“No. I don’t know. Yes. Maybe?”

“I swear to God, Sadie, if you—”

“Yes.” I straighten up. “Yes, it does make sense. I did detail my framework for sustainability proposals in my published article, and I detailed it even more in my thesis—”

“Which you maybe should have embargoed,” Hannah interjects, playing with her dark hair.

“—which I *definitely* should have embargoed, so it’s possible that someone who read my stuff could have used it to mimic my pitch. Of course, when it comes to actually *doing* the work, they won’t have the expertise Gianna or I have, but that’s a problem for later. I guess that what Erik said *is* . . . conceivable.”

“So, no genital funguses?” Mara asks. “I mean, it seems only fair, considering that you *did* publish that article *and* write that thesis to encourage people to adopt your approach.”

“Right. Yeah.” I close my eyes, wishing for the seventeenth time in the past two hours that I could vanish into nothingness. Maybe since the last time I checked, a portal to another dimension has appeared in my closet. Maybe I can travel to Noconsequencesofmyownactionsland. “I didn’t really figure it would be used by my direct competitors.”

“I realize that,” she says, with a tone that suggests a strong *but*. “*But*, I’m not positive that it’s Erik’s fault, either.”

“And he did apologize,” Hannah adds. “Also, the fact that he read your dissertation is kind of cute. How many of the guys I’ve slept with have read my stuff, do you think?”

“No clue. How many?”

“Well, as you know, I firmly believe that sex and conversation don’t mix well, but I’d estimate . . . a solid zero?”

“Sounds about right,” Mara says. “Plus, you said he offered to find a way to fix the situation. And that just doesn’t seem like something he would do if he didn’t care about you.”

“Agreed.” Hannah nods. “My vote is for no genital pimples.”

“Same. I am dissolving the summoning circle as we speak.”

“No, wait, no dissolving, I—” I scrub my eyes with the heels of my hands. “Whose side are you guys even on?”

“Yours, Sadie.”

“Unlike you,” Hannah adds.

“I— What does that even *mean*?”

They exchange a look. I know we’re on a Zoom call and it’s technically impossible for them to exchange a look, but they *are exchanging a damn look*. I can *feel* it. “Well,” Hannah says, “here’s the deal. You meet this guy. And you boink him. And it’s really good boinking—yay. The day after, you find out that he’s a dick, which sends you on a three-week downward curlicue of tears and Talenti gelato that’s about twelve times more intense than the time you broke up with a dude you’d been dating for *years*. But then you find out that it was all a misunderstanding, that things might be fixable, and . . . you leave? You said he wanted to talk more, and it’s obvious that you’re interested in hearing what he’s saying. So why *did* you leave, Sadie?”

I stare at Hannah’s implacable, matter-of-fact, kind eyes, which go very well with her implacable, matter-of-fact, kind voice, and mutter: “I liked it better when you were in Lapland.”

She grins. “I did, too, which is why I’m trying to get back there—but let us return to discussing your *terrible* communication skills.”

“They’re not that bad.”

“Eh. They kind of are,” Mara says.

I glare at Mara, too. I’m an equal-opportunity glarer. “You know what? I will accept that my communication skills are poor, but I refuse to be shamed by someone who’s on the verge of going ring shopping with the dude she once nearly called the cops on because he left a CVS receipt in the dryer.”

“Pfft, they’re not going *ring shopping*.” Hannah waves her hand dismissively. “I bet she’s going to get some kind of family heirloom.”

“Doesn’t he have older brothers?” I ask. “They probably already ran out of heirlooms four weddings ago.”

“Oh yeah. Maybe there will be some shopping. You think he’s going to call us from some D.C. mall’s Claire’s asking us which ring Mara would prefer?”

“Oh my God, you know what? Last week I read somewhere that Costco sells engagement rings— Oh, hi, Liam.”

Mara’s boyfriend enters the screen and comes to stand right behind her. In the past few weeks he’s become a sort of informal fourth in our calls—an occasional guest star, if you will, who mines for embarrassing grad school stories about Mara and kindly offers to murder our asshole male colleagues when we complain. Considering that our first introduction to him was Mara plotting to booby-trap his bathroom, it’s surprisingly fun to have him around.

“Really, guys?” he asks, all frowny and dark and cross-armed. “Claire’s? *Costco?*”

Hannah and I both gasp. “Costco is *amazing*.”

“Yeah, Liam. What do you have against Costco?”

He shakes his head at us, presses a kiss on the crown of Mara’s head, and exits the frame. I’m a fan, I must say.

“Okay,” Mara says, “going back to your poor communication skills.”

I roll my eyes.

“Are you still angry at Erik?” Hannah asks. “Because you spent weeks being sad, and furious, and sadly furious. Even if you now know that your reasons weren’t as valid, I feel like it would still be hard to let go of that. So maybe that’s the issue here?”

I think about Erik's hand closing around my arm in the lobby. About the way he kept looking at me when the elevator restarted: focused, intent, like the world could spin twice as fast as normal and he still wouldn't have cared, not if I were nearby. I don't let myself recall the words he said, but a memory resurfaces, of us laughing and standing in his kitchen and eating Chinese leftovers, and I don't push it down. For the first time in weeks, it's not soaked in resentment and betrayal. Just the achy, poignant sweetness of the night we spent together. Of Erik turning up the thermostat when I said I was cold, then wrapping his large, warm hands around the soles of my feet. That feeling of being right there, on the brink of something.

I don't think I'm angry, not anymore.

"It's not that," I say.

"Okay. So the problem is that you don't believe him?"

"I . . . No. I do. I don't think Gianna deliberately lied to me, but she didn't have all the facts."

"What is it, then?"

I swallow, trying to prod at the reason my stomach feels leaden, the reason I've been feeling sick with disappointment and fear ever since finding out the truth. And then it hits me. The one thing I have been actively trying not to verbalize hits me just as I say, "It doesn't matter, anyway."

"Why doesn't it matter?"

I close my eyes. Yes. That's it. That's why. "Because I ruined it."

"Ruined it, how?"

Now that I can name it for what it is, the horrible feeling grows, acid and bitter in my throat. "He won't be interested in me. He met me and thought that I was funny, that he had tons of things in common with me, that he really liked me, and then I . . . I acted like a totally irrational, absurd, deranged person and blocked his number and accused him of fucking *corporate espionage* and maybe he wants to set the record straight, maybe he hates the idea of me thinking that he's a horrible person, but there's no way he wants to pick up where we left off and—aaaargh." I bury my face in my hand.

I fucked up. I just . . . I fucked up. And now I have to live with the knowledge of it. I have to go on in a world in which no man will ever compare to Erik Nowak. No man will ever make me laugh, and make my body sing, and make my soul absolutely indignant with his outrageous opinions on Galatasaray—all at once.

“Oh, honey.” Mara cocks her head. “You don’t know that.”

“I do. It’s likely.”

“That’s not the point.” Hannah leans closer to the screen till all I can see are her beautiful face and dark eyes. “Okay, so Erik now knows that you occasionally display an appalling lack of conflict-resolution initiative.”

I groan. “I really wish I had the emotional fortitude to hang up on you.”

“But you don’t. What I’m saying is, maybe Erik will decide that you’ll make for a terrible girlfriend who overreacts and is more trouble than you’re worth. Maybe he’ll decide that he wants to bitch about you on the relationship subreddit. But if you cut him out like you did three weeks ago, you’d just be making this decision *for* him.”

I blink, confused, suddenly remembering why I went into engineering. Logarithmic derivatives are so much easier than this relationship shit. “What do you mean?”

“Sadie, I know you like this guy a lot. I know that if he does decide that he doesn’t want you in his life it’s going to hurt, and that you’re tempted to preemptively pull back to protect yourself. But if you don’t at least give him a chance to choose you, you’ll lose him for sure.”

I nod slowly, trying to think past the hard knot in my throat. Letting the idea—*go for it, just go for it, ask for what you want, be brave*—slowly seep through me. Remembering Erik. Remembering the breeze hanging between us on a park bench, on a deserted sidewalk. The way my stomach fluttered at the feelings it carried. Of *possibilities*. Of *maybe*.

This is my new happy place, Erik murmured into the shell of my ear the second time we had sex that night. And then he pushed my sweaty hair away from my forehead, and I looked up at him and thought, *His eyes are the exact color of the sky when the sun shines*. And I always, *always* loved the sky.

“You’re right,” I say. “You’re so right. I should go to him.”

Hannah smiles. “Well, it’s actually what, one A.M. in New York? I was thinking more of a phone call tomorrow morning. Around ten.”

“Yes. I should go to him *right now*.”

“That’s the exact opposite of—”

“I gotta go. Love you.”

I hang up and bounce out of bed, looking for a jacket and my phone. I start ordering an Uber, except—shit. I know where Erik lives, but not his address. I run to the door, simultaneously looking for my keys and typing

the closest landmark to his apartment that I can recall. How the hell do you spell—

"Sadie?"

I look up. Erik is standing in my open door. Erik, in all his tall, unsmiling, Corporate-Thorship splendor. Wearing the same clothes he had on when I left him plus a light jacket, his hand up in midair and clearly about to knock.

"Are you going somewhere?"

"No. Yes. No. I . . ." I take a step back. Another. Another. Erik stays right where he is and my cheeks burn. Am I hallucinating him? Is he really here in Astoria? In my apartment? I hear a loud thunk, and my keys are on the linoleum floor. I need a nap. I need a seven-year nap.

"Here." He bends down to pick up the keys, pauses for a second to study my soccer ball key chain, and holds them out to me. "Can I come in for five minutes? Just to talk. If you feel uncomfortable, the hallway's okay, too—"

"No. No, I . . ." I clear my throat. "You can come in."

A brief hesitation. Then a nod as he steps in and closes the door behind himself. But he doesn't move any farther inside, stopping in the entrance and simply saying, "Thank you."

I was coming to you, I open my mouth to say. *I was on my way to tell you many, many confusing things*. But the surprise of seeing him here has frozen my bravery, and instead of flooding him with the impassioned speech I would have typed on my Notes app in the Uber, I just stare. Silent.

For fuck's sake, what is *wrong* with me—

"Here," he says, holding out a phone. His phone.

Uh? "Why are you giving this to me?"

"Because I want you to look through it. The passcode is 1111."

I glance at his face. "1111? Are you joking?"

"Yeah, I know. Just ignore it."

I snort. "You can't ask me *that*."

He sighs. "Fine. You are allowed *one* comment."

"How about one one one one comments—"

"That's it. Your comment, you used it up. Now—"

"Come on, I have *way* more to—"

"—will you please unlock the phone?"

I pout but do as he says. Mostly out of sheer bewilderment. "Done."

He nods. “If you click on my email app, you’ll find my work correspondence. Most of those messages are highly confidential, so I’m going to ask you not to read them. But I want you to search for your last name.”

“Why would I do that?”

“Because it’s all there. The emails. Me requesting your thesis. Me circulating it to ProBld like an asshole. A couple of instances of me generally discussing your writing. The timeline should confirm what I already told you.” I stare at him. Speechless. Then he continues, and it gets worse. “This is all I can think of, but if there’s anything else I can show you that will help you believe that Gianna misinterpreted things, let me know. I’m happy to leave my phone here. Take however long you want to go through it. If someone calls or texts, ignore them.”

It’s the calm, earnest way he’s looking at me that does it. It snaps what’s left of my terror of being rejected, and I’m abruptly done with whatever fearful bullshit my brain is trying to feed me.

A new knowledge uncurls inside me, and I instantly *know* what to do. I *know* how to do it. And it starts with clutching his phone tight, stepping closer, and sliding it into the pocket of his jacket. I let my hand linger inside for a second, feeling the warmth from Erik’s body. The clean cotton. No lint or candy wrappers or empty ChapStick tubes.

I adore it. I love it. My hand wants to slip inside this pocket on rainy fall afternoons and chilly spring mornings. My hand wants to move in and just *live* here, right next to Erik’s.

But for now, there’s something else I need to do. Which is holding out my own phone to him. He looks at it skeptically, until I say, “My passcode is 1930.”

His mouth twitches. “Year of the first FIFA World Cup?”

I laugh, because . . . yeah. Out of everyone, *he* would know. And then I feel myself starting to cry, because of course, out of everyone in the entire world, *he* would know.

“Unlock it, please,” I say between sniffles. Erik is wide-eyed, alarmed by the tears, trying to come closer and to pull me to him, but I don’t let him. “Unlock my phone, Erik. Please.”

He quickly punches in the numbers. “Done. Sadie, are you—”

“Go to my contacts. Find yours. It’s . . . I changed it. To your actual name.” *It’s hard to sustain high and prolonged levels of hatred at someone*

who's saved on your phone with a cutesy nickname, I don't add, but the thought has me chuckling, wet, watery.

"Done." He sounds impatient. "Can I—"

"Okay." I take a deep breath. "Now, please, unblock your number."

A pause. Then: "What?"

"I blocked your number. Because I . . ." I wipe my cheek with the back of my hand, but there're more tears coming. "Because I couldn't bear to . . . Because. But I think you should unblock it." I sniffle again. Loudly. "So if you decided that you don't mind the fact that sometimes I can be a total lunatic, and if you want to give me a call and give the . . . the thing we were doing another chance, then I'd be happy to pick up and—"

I find myself pulled into his body, hugged tight against his chest, and I should probably insist on apologizing properly and offer an in-depth debriefing of everything that has occurred, but I just let myself sink into him. Smell his familiar scent. When he smooths my hair back, I bury my face into his shirt and melt, soaking in the silence and the relief.

"I think I just really suck at one-night stands," I say, muffled into the soft fabric.

"We didn't have a one-night stand, Sadie."

"Okay. I mean, I don't know. I've never . . ."

"I've had enough for both, and then some." He pulls back to look at me, and repeats, "We did *not* have a one-night stand."

I don't make the conscious decision to kiss him. It just happens. One second we're looking at each other, the next we're not. Erik tastes like himself and a late-spring night in New York. He holds my head in his palm, presses me into him; he groans, bends down to push me into the wall, and licks the inside of my mouth.

"So we're good?" he asks, coming up for air. I want to nod, but I forget when he bends down for another kiss, just as deep as the one that came before. Then he remembers his question and repeats, "Sadie? Are we good?"

I close my eyes and bite into his bottom lip. It's soft, and plump, and I remember the patient way he worked between my legs. I remember coming over and over, the pleasure so strong I couldn't comprehend it—

"Sadie." He's not breathing normally. He takes a step back, like he needs a moment to get himself under control. "Are we good? Because if you think *this* is a one-night stand, then—"

“No. I . . .” I reach up to his face. This time, when I bring his mouth down to mine, my kiss is slow and gentle. “No. We’re good.”

“Promise?” he asks against my lips.

I nod. And then, because it seems important: “I promise.”

It’s like flipping a switch. One moment he’s looking at me questioningly, the next our hands are on each other, me unzipping his jeans, him unbuttoning my blouse. There is a heat growing between us, a heat that has us work frenziedly, clumsy and too eager. When I tug down his jeans and briefs his cock springs out, straining and leaking and so hard, it has to hurt. I wrap my hand around him, pump up and down a couple of times, and he groans, a soft, guttural sound. Then he pulls me away, pins my wrist to the wall, and attacks my pants.

His fingers brush under the elastic of my underwear, and when his knuckles graze the damp cloth of my panties it’s all I can do not to spread my legs as far as they’ll go. “Purple,” he rasps out when my slacks are pooled around my ankles. “Finally.”

“Pitch today. Yesterday,” I amend, helping him get rid of my top.

“By the way,” he says, voice scratchy, “last time you left your bra at my place.” He traces the line of the one I have on but doesn’t take it off. Instead, he lowers the lace cups, tucks them under the curve of my breasts. When my exposed nipples harden to points, we both make choked, breathy noises.

“Y-you can keep it.”

“Good.”

“Good?”

His thumb moves back and forth across my nipple. “It’s not exactly in a . . . pristine state.”

I laugh, breathless. “Why? Have you been using it?”

He doesn’t reply. Instead he lifts me up until my legs are wrapped around his hips, pinning me against the wall next to the door even though there’s a bed, a couch, a dozen pieces of furniture just a handful of feet away—and then stops abruptly. “Do you— Are you feeling trapped? Is this—”

“No, it’s good. Perfect. Please, just—”

He hooks his fingers in the crotch of my panties, haphazardly shoves them to the side, and he tries one, two angles that can’t possibly work, but then he adjusts me, he tilts me like I’m no larger than a doll, and on the third try he just . . .

Slips inside. The pressure is enormous, stretching and burning and familiar and inexorable and lovely, and all I can think of is how much I missed this, the sharp feeling of something too big that's somehow meant to fit inside me, the way he mutters *sorry*, *please*, *more*, *almost there*.

"I missed you," he breathes against my temple when he's reached a full seat, sounding like he's under great strain. "I only knew you for twenty-four hours, but I've never missed anyone so much."

I moan. An embarrassing, mewling sound that cannot possibly come from my mouth. "For the record." I feel so full, I can barely speak. "I thought the sex was good." It's an understatement. It's as much as I am physically able to say right now.

"Yeah?" He bites me on the flesh between my neck and my shoulder—not hard enough to break my skin, enough to suggest that he's not fully in control. It reminds me of our night together, the way he kept me still for his thrusts, the way he made me feel at once powerful and powerless. "That's good. Because I can't think of anything else." He moves inside me. Once, twice. Once more, a little too forceful, but perfect. My forehead leans against his, and he pants into my mouth. "Three weeks, and I could only think of you."

It lasts less than a dozen thrusts. His mouth is by my ear as he tells me how beautiful I am, how he wants to feel all of me, how he could fuck me every second of every hour of every day. The spasms bloom inside me, drive me mindless, and I cling on to his shoulders as my orgasm explodes through my body, wiping my mind clean. *Erik*, I mouth against his hair. *Erik, Erik, Erik.* He stays still while I ride it out, a near-silent growl in his throat, the tension in his arms nearly vibrating. Then, when I'm almost done, he asks,

"Should I— Fuck, should I pull out?"

"No," I exhale. "I'm—we're good. Pill."

He comes inside me before I'm done talking, burying the sounds of his pleasure into the skin of my throat.

We stay like that, after. He holds me up, like he knows that I would wobble on my legs if he were to let go of me, and kisses me for long moments. Chaste pecks wherever he can reach, long licks up my sweaty neck, soft hickeys that have me squirming and giggling in his arms. I never, ever want this moment to end. I want to paint it and frame it and hang it on the wall—*this* wall—and treasure it and make a million more and—

“Sadie?” Erik’s voice is even deeper than usual. I am happy and pliant and relaxed.

“Yeah?”

“Do you still have your hamster?”

“Guinea pig.”

“Same thing. Do you still have it?”

“Yeah.” I pause. “Why?”

“Just making sure that a giant rat isn’t trying to eat my jeans.”

I look down over his shoulder and burst into laughter for the first time in weeks.

Epilogue

One month later

“Okay,” I say, determined. I stare first at my masterpiece and at the remnants of my hard work, and then I repeat, louder, “Okay, I’m ready! Prepare to be blown away!”

Erik appears at the entrance of his kitchen about five seconds later, looking sleepy and relaxed and handsome in his Hanes T-shirt and plaid pajama pants. “You have dough on your nose,” he says, before leaning forward to kiss it away. Then he sits across from me, on the other side of the island.

“Okay. Moment of truth.” I slide a small porcelain plate toward him. On top there is a croissant—the fruit of my many, *many* labors.

So. Many. Labors.

“Looks good.”

“Thank you.” I beam. “Made from scratch.”

“I can tell.” With a small smile, he glances at how three quarters of his kitchen is coated in flour.

“My culinary genius is apparently a bit chaotic. Come on, try it.”

He picks up the croissant in his huge hands and takes a bite. He chews for one, two, three, four, five seconds, and I should probably give him a little more time, but I just can’t wait to ask, “You like it? Is it good?”

He chews some more.

“Amazing? Fantastic? Delicious?”

More chewing.

“Edible?”

The chewing stops. Erik sets the croissant back on the table and swallows once. With noticeable difficulty. Then washes it all down with a sip of coffee.

“Well?” I ask.

“It’s . . .”

“It cannot be *bad*.”

Silence.

“Right?”

He tilts his head, pensive. “Is it possible that you mixed up salt and sugar?”

“No! I . . . Is it worse that Faye’s?” He thinks about it. Which is all the answer I need. “I hate you.”

“There is a bit of a . . . vinegary aftertaste? Did you maybe add that instead of water?”

“What?” I scowl. “I think *you* are the problem. I think you just don’t like croissants.”

He shrugs. “Yeah, maybe it’s me.”

Cat jumps on the island. He gingerly sidesteps our mugs and with a curious expression sniffs Erik’s croissant. “Oh, buddy, no,” Erik whispers. “You don’t want to do that.” Cat takes a delicate lick. Then he turns to me to stare with a horrified, betrayed expression.

Erik doesn’t even *try* not to laugh.

“I hate you.” I close my eyes, quietly planning murder and mayhem and lots of truculent revenge scenarios. I will deface his jerseys. I will pour soy sauce in his chocolate milk. I will hoard the down comforter for the next ten nights. “I hate you,” I repeat. “I hate you so, so much.”

“Nah.” When I open my eyes, Erik’s smile is warm and soft. “I don’t think you do, Sadie.”

Don’t miss

Love on the Brain

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“By the way, you can get leprosy from armadillos.”

I peel my nose away from the airplane window and glance at Rocío, my research assistant. “Really?”

“Yep. They got it from humans millennia ago, and now they’re giving it back to us.” She shrugs. “Revenge and cold dishes and all that.”

I scrutinize her beautiful face for hints that she’s lying. Her large dark eyes, heavily rimmed with eyeliner, are inscrutable. Her hair is so Vantablack, it absorbs 99 percent of visible light. Her mouth is full, curved downward in its typical pout.

Nope. I got nothing. “Is this for real?”

“Would I ever lie to you?”

“Last week you swore to me that Stephen King was writing a Winnie-the-Pooh spin-off.” And I believed her. Like I believed that Lady Gaga is a known satanist, or that badminton racquets are made from human bones and intestines. Chaotic goth misanthropy and creepy deadpan sarcasm are her brand, and I should know better than to take her seriously. Problem is, every once in a while she’ll throw in a crazy-sounding story that upon further inspection (i.e., a Google search) is revealed to be true. For instance, did you know that the *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* was inspired by a true story? Before Rocío, I didn’t. And I slept significantly better.

“Don’t believe me, then.” She shrugs, going back to her grad school admission prep book. “Go pet the leper armadillos and die.”

She’s such a weirdo. I adore her.

“Hey, you sure you’re going to be fine, away from Alex for the next few months?” I feel a little guilty for taking her away from her boyfriend. When I was twenty-two, if someone had asked me to be apart from Tim for months, I’d have walked into the sea. Then again, hindsight has proven beyond doubt that I was a complete idiot, and Rocío seems pretty enthused

for the opportunity. She plans to apply to Johns Hopkins's neuro program in the fall, and the NASA line on her CV won't hurt. She even hugged me when I invited her to come along—a moment of weakness I'm sure she deeply regrets.

"Fine? Are you kidding?" She looks at me like I'm insane. "Three months in Texas, do you know how many times I'll get to see La Llorona?"

"La . . . what?"

She rolls her eyes and pops in her AirPods. "You really know *nothing* about famed feminist ghosts."

I bite back a smile and turn back to the window. In 1905, Dr. Curie decided to invest her Nobel Prize money into hiring her first research assistant. I wonder if she, too, ended up working with a mildly terrifying, Cthulhu-worshipping emo girl. I stare at the clouds until I'm bored, and then I take my phone out of my pocket and connect to the complimentary in-flight Wi-Fi. I glance at Rocío, making sure that she's not paying attention to me, and angle my screen away.

I'm not a very secretive person, mostly out of laziness: I refuse to take on the cognitive labor of tracking lies and omissions. I do, however, have one secret. One single piece of information that I've never shared with anyone—not even my sister. Don't get me wrong, I trust Reike with my life, but I also know her well enough to picture the scene: she is wearing a flowy sundress and flirting with a Scottish shepherd she met in a trattoria on the Amalfi Coast. They decide to do the shrooms they just purchased from a Belarusian farmer, and mid-trip she accidentally blurts out the one thing she's been expressly forbidden to repeat: her twin sister, Bee, runs one of the most popular and controversial accounts on Academic Twitter. The Scottish shepherd's cousin is a closeted men's rights activist who sends me a dead possum in the mail and rats me out to his insane friends, and I get fired.

No, thank you. I love my job (and possums) too much for this.

I created @WhatWouldMarieDo during my first semester of grad school. I was teaching a neuroanatomy class and decided to give my students an anonymous mid-semester survey to ask for honest feedback on how to improve the course. What I got was . . . not that. I was told that my lectures would be more interesting if I delivered them naked. That I should gain some weight, get a boob job, stop dying my hair "unnatural colors," get rid

of my piercings. I was even given a phone number to call if I was “ever in the mood for a ten-inch dick.” (Yeah, right.)

The messages were pretty appalling, but what sent me sobbing in a bathroom stall was the reactions of the other students in my cohort—Tim included. They laughed the comments off as harmless pranks and dissuaded me from reporting them to the department chair, telling me that I’d be making a stink about nothing.

They were, of course, all men.

(Seriously: Why *are* men?)

That night I fell asleep crying. The following day, I got up, wondered how many other women in STEM felt as alone as I did, and impulsively downloaded Twitter and made @WhatWouldMarieDo. I slapped on a poorly photoshopped pic of Dr. Curie wearing sunglasses and a one-line bio: *Making the periodic table girlier since 1889 (she/her).* I just wanted to scream into the void. I honestly didn’t think that anyone would even see my first Tweet. But I was wrong.

> @WhatWouldMarieDo What would Dr. Curie, first female professor at La Sorbonne, do if one of her students asked her to deliver her lectures naked?
>
> @198888 She would shorten his half-life.
>
> @annahhhh RAT HIM OUT TO PIERRE!!!
>
> @emily89 Put some polonium in his pants and watch his dick shrivel.
>
> @bioworm55 Nuke him NUKE HIM
>
> @lucyinthesea Has this happened to you? God I’m so sorry. Once a student said something about my ass and it was so gross and no one believed me.

Over half a decade later, after a handful of *Chronicle of Higher Education* nods, a *New York Times* article, and about a million followers, WWMD is my happy place. What’s best is, I think the same is true for many others. The account has evolved into a therapeutic community of sorts, used by women in STEM to tell their stories, exchange advice, and . . . bitch.

Oh, we bitch. We bitch a lot, and it’s glorious.

> @BiologySarah Hey, @WhatWouldMarieDo if she weren’t given authorship on a project that was originally her idea and that she worked on for over one year? All other authors are men, because *of course* they are.

“Yikes.” I scrunch my face and quote-tweet Sarah.

> Marie would slip some radium in their coffee. Also, she would consider reporting this to her institution’s Office of Research Integrity, making sure to document every step of the process ♥

I hit send, drum my fingers on the armrest, and wait. My answers are not the main attraction of the account, not in the least. The real reason people reach out to WWMD is . . .

Yep. This. I feel my grin widen as the replies start coming in.

> @DrAllixx This happened to me, too. I was the only woman and only POC in the author lineup and my name suddenly disappeared during revisions. DM if u want to chat, Sarah.

> @AmyBernard I am a member of the Women in Science Association, and we have advice for situations like this on our website (they’re sadly common)!

> @TheGeologician Going through the same situation rn @BiologySarah. I did report it to ORI and it’s still unfolding but I’m happy to talk if you need to vent.

> @SteveHarrison Dude, breaking news: you’re lying to yourself. Your contributions aren’t VALUABLE enough to warrant authorship. Your team did you a favor letting you tag along for a while but if you’re not smart enough, you’re OUT. Not everything is about being a woman, sometimes you’re just A LOSER

It is a truth universally acknowledged that a community of women trying to mind their own business must be in want of a random man’s opinion.

I’ve long learned that engaging with basement-dwelling STEMlords who come online looking for a fight is never a good idea—the last thing I want is to provide free entertainment for their fragile egos. If they want to blow off some steam, they can buy a gym membership or play third-person-shooter video games. Like normal people.

I make to hide @SteveHarrison’s delightful contribution but notice that someone has replied to him.

> @Shmacademics Yeah, Marie, sometimes you’re just a loser. Steve would know.

I chuckle.

> @WhatWouldMarieDo Aw, Steve. Don’t be too hard on yourself.

> @Shmacademics He is just a boy, standing in front of a girl, asking her to do twice as much work as he ever did in order to prove that she’s worthy of becoming a scientist.

> @WhatWouldMarieDo Steve, you old romantic.

> @SteveHarrison Fuck you. This ridiculous push for women in STEM is ruining STEM. People should get jobs because they're good NOT BECAUSE THEY HAVE VAGINAS. But now people feel like they have to hire women and they get jobs over men who are MORE QUALIFIED. This is the end of STEM AND IT'S WRONG.
>
> @WhatWouldMarieDo I can see you're upset about this, Steve.
>
> @Shmacademics There, there.

Steve blocks both of us, and I chuckle again, drawing a curious glance from Rocío. @Shmacademics is another hugely popular account on Academic Twitter, and by far my favorite. He mostly tweets about how he should be writing, makes fun of elitism and ivory-tower academics, and points out bad or biased science. I was initially a bit distrustful of him—his bio says "he/him," and we all know how cis men on the internet can be. But he and I ended up forming an alliance of sorts. When the STEMlords take offense at the sheer idea of women in STEM and start pitchforking in my mentions, he helps me ridicule them a little. I'm not sure when we started direct messaging, when I stopped being afraid that he was secretly a retired Gamergater out to doxx me, or when I began considering him a friend. But a handful of years later, here we are, chatting about half a dozen different things a couple of times a week, without having even exchanged real names. Is it weird, knowing that Shmac had lice three times in second grade but not which time zone he lives in? A bit. But it's also liberating. Plus, having opinions online can be very dangerous. The internet is a sea full of creepy, cybercriminal fish, and if Mark Zuckerberg can cover his laptop webcam with a piece of tape, I reserve the right to keep things painfully anonymous.

The flight attendant offers me a glass of water from a tray. I shake my head, smile, and DM Shmac.

Marie: I think Steve doesn't want to play with us anymore.

Shmac: I think Steve wasn't held enough as a tadpole.

Marie: Lol!

Shmac: How's life?

Marie: Good! Cool new project starting next week. My ticket away from my gross boss

Shmac: I hope so. Can't believe dude's still around.

Marie: The power of connections. And inertia. What about you?

Shmac: Work's interesting.

Marie: Good interesting?

Shmac: Politicky interesting. So, no.
Marie: I'm afraid to ask. How's the rest?
Shmac: Weird.
Marie: Did your cat poop in your shoe again?
Shmac: No, but I did find a tomato in my boot the other day.
Marie: Send pics next time! What's going on?
Shmac: Nothing, really.
Marie: Oh, come on!
Shmac: How do you even know something's going on?
Marie: Your lack of exclamation points!
Shmac: !!!!!!!11!!1!!!!!
Marie: Shmac.
Shmac: FYI, I'm sighing deeply.
Marie: I bet. Tell me!
Shmac: It's a girl.
Marie: Ooooh! Tell me EVERYTHING!!!!!!!11!!1!!!!!
Shmac: There isn't much to tell.
Marie: Did you just meet her?
Shmac: No. She's someone I've known for a long time, and now she's back.
Shmac: And she is married.
Marie: To you?
Shmac: Depressingly, no.
Shmac: Sorry—we're restructuring the lab. Gotta go before someone destroys a 5 mil piece of equipment. Talk later.
Marie: Sure, but I'll want to know everything about your affair with a married woman
Shmac: I wish.

It's nice to know that Shmac is always a click away, especially now that I'm flying into the Wardass's frosty, unwelcoming lap.

I switch to my email app to check if Levi has finally answered the email I sent three days ago. It was just a couple of lines—*Hey, long time no see, I look forward to working together again, would you like to meet to discuss BLINK this weekend?*—but he must have been too busy to reply. Or too full of contempt. Or both.

Ugh.

I lean back against the headrest and close my eyes, wondering how Dr. Curie would deal with Levi Ward. She'd probably hide some radioactive isotopes in his pockets, grab popcorn, and watch nuclear decay work its magic.

Yep, sounds about right.

After a few minutes, I fall asleep. I dream that Levi is part armadillo: his skin glows a faint, sallow green, and he's digging a tomato out of his boot with an expensive piece of equipment. Even with all of that, the weirdest thing about him is that he's finally being nice to me.

• • •

We're put up in small furnished apartments in a lodging facility just outside the Johnson Space Center, only a couple of minutes from the Sullivan Discovery Building, where we'll be working. I can't believe how short my commute is going to be.

"Bet you'll still manage to be late all the time," Rocío tells me, and I glare at her while unlocking my door. It's not my fault if I've spent a sizable chunk of my formative years in Italy, where time is but a polite suggestion.

The place is considerably nicer than the apartment I rent—maybe because of the raccoon incident, probably because I buy 90 percent of my furniture from the as-is bargain corner at Ikea. It has a balcony, a dishwasher, and—huge improvement on my quality of life—a toilet that flushes 100 percent of the times I push the lever. Truly paradigm shifting. I excitedly open and close every single cupboard (they're all empty; I'm not sure what I expected), take pictures to send Reike and my coworkers, stick my favorite Marie Curie magnet to the fridge (a picture of her holding a beaker that says "I'm pretty rad"), hang my hummingbird feeder on the balcony, and then . . .

It's still only two-thirty p.m. Ugh.

Not that I'm one of those people who hates having free time. I could easily spend five solid hours napping, rewatching an entire season of *The Office* while eating Twizzlers, or moving to step 2 of the couch-to-5K plan I'm still very . . . okay, *sort of* committed to. But I am here! In Houston! Near the Space Center! About to start the coolest project of my life!

It's Friday, and I'm not due to check in until Monday, but I'm brimming with nervous energy. So I text Rocío to ask whether she wants to check out

the Space Center with me (*No*.) or to grab dinner together (*I only eat animal carcasses*.).

She's so mean. I love her.

My first impression of Houston is: big. Closely followed by: humid, and then by: humidly big. In Maryland, remnants of snow still cling to the ground, but the Space Center is already lush and green, a mix of open spaces and large buildings and old NASA aircraft on display. There are families visiting, which reminds me a little of an amusement park. I can't believe I'm going to be seeing rockets on my way to work for the next three months. It sure beats the perv crossing guard who works on the NIH campus.

The Discovery Building is on the outskirts of the center. It's wide, futuristic, and three-storied, with glass walls and a complicated-looking stair system I can't quite figure out. I step inside the marble hall, wondering if my new office will have a window. I'm not used to natural light; the sudden intake of vitamin D might kill me.

"I'm Bee Königswasser." I smile at the receptionist. "I'm starting work here on Monday, and I was wondering if I could take a look around?"

He gives me an apologetic smile. "I can't let you in if you don't have an ID badge. The engineering labs are upstairs—high-security areas."

Right. Yes. The engineering labs. Levi's labs. He's probably up there, hard at work. Engineering. Labbing. Not answering my emails.

"No problem, that's understandable. I'll just—"

"Dr. Königswasser? Bee?"

I turn around. There is a blond young man behind me. He's nonthreateningly handsome, medium height, smiling at me like we're old friends even though he doesn't look familiar. " . . . Hi?"

"I didn't mean to eavesdrop, but I caught your name, and . . . I'm Guy. Guy Kowalsky?"

The name clicks immediately. I break into a grin. "Guy! It's so nice to meet you in person." When I was first notified of BLINK, Guy was my point of contact for logistics questions, and he and I emailed back and forth a few times. He's an astronaut—*an actual astronaut!*—working on BLINK while he's grounded. He seemed so familiar with the project, I initially assumed he'd be my co-lead.

He shakes my hand warmly. "I love your work! I've read all your articles—you'll be such an asset to the project."

“Likewise. I can’t wait to collaborate.”

If I weren’t dehydrated from the flight, I’d probably tear up. I cannot believe that this man, this nice, pleasant man who has given me more positive interactions in one minute than Dr. Wardass did in one year, could have been my co-lead. I must have pissed off some god. Zeus? Eros? Must be Poseidon. Shouldn’t have peed in the Baltic Sea during my misspent youth.

“Why don’t I show you around? You can come in as my guest.” He nods to the receptionist and gestures at me to follow him.

“I wouldn’t want to take you away from . . . astronauting?”

“I’m between missions. Giving you a tour beats debugging any day.” He shrugs, something boyishly charming about him. We’ll get along great, I already know it.

“Have you lived in Houston long?” I ask as we step into the elevator.

“About eight years. Came to NASA right out of grad school. Applied for the Astronaut Corps, did the training, then a mission.” I do some math in my head. It would put him in his mid-thirties, older than I initially thought. “The past two or so, I worked on BLINK’s precursor. Engineering the structure of the helmet, figuring out the wireless system. But we got to a point where we needed a neurostimulation expert on board.” He gives me a warm smile.

“I cannot wait to see what we cook up together.” I also cannot wait to find out why Levi was given the lead of this project over someone who has been on it for five years. It just seems unfair. To Guy *and* to me.

The elevator doors open, and he points to a quaint-looking café in the corner. “That place over there—amazing sandwiches, worst coffee in the world. You hungry?”

“No, thanks.”

“You sure? It’s on me. The egg sandwiches are almost as good as the coffee is bad.”

“I don’t really eat eggs.”

“Let me guess, a vegan?”

I nod. I try hard to break the stereotypes that plague my people and not use the word “vegan” in my first three meetings with a new acquaintance, but if they’re the ones to mention it, all bets are off.

“I should introduce you to my daughter. She recently announced that she won’t eat animal products anymore.” He sighs. “Last weekend I poured

regular milk in her cereal figuring she wouldn't know the difference. She told me that her legal team will be in touch."

"How old is she?"

"Just turned six."

I laugh. "Good luck with that."

I stopped having meat at seven, when I realized that the delicious *pollo* nuggets my Sicilian grandmother served nearly every day and the cute *galline* grazing about the farm were more . . . connected than I originally suspected. Stunning plot twist, I know. Reike wasn't nearly as distraught: when I frantically explained that "Pigs have families, too. A mom and a dad and siblings that will miss them," she just nodded thoughtfully and said, "What you're saying is, we should eat the whole family?" I went fully vegan a couple of years later. Meanwhile, my sister has made it her life's goal to eat enough animal products for two. Together we emit one normal person's carbon footprint.

"The engineering labs are down this hallway," Guy says. The space is an interesting mix of glass and wood, and I can see inside some of the rooms. "A bit cluttered, and most people are off today—we're shuffling around equipment and reorganizing the space. We've got lots of ongoing projects, but BLINK's everyone's favorite child. The other astronauts pop by every once in a while just to ask how much longer it will be until their fancy swag is ready."

I grin. "For real?"

"Yep."

Making fancy swag for astronauts is my literal job description. I can add it to my LinkedIn profile. Not that anyone uses LinkedIn.

"The neuroscience labs—your labs—will be on the right. This way there are—" His phone rings. "Sorry—mind if I take it?"

"Not at all." I smile at his beaver phone case ("Nature's Engineer") and look away.

I wonder whether Guy would think I'm lame if I snapped a few pictures of the building for my friends. I decide that I can live with that, but when I take out my phone, I hear a noise from down the hallway. It's soft and chirpy, and sounds a lot like a . . .

"Meow."

I glance back at Guy. He's busy explaining how to put on *Moana* to someone very young, so I decide to investigate. Most of the rooms are

deserted, labs full of large, abstruse equipment that looks like it belongs to . . . well. NASA. I hear male voices somewhere in the building, but no sign of the—

"Meow."

I turn around. A few feet away, staring at me with a curious expression, is a beautiful young calico.

"And who might you be?" I slowly hold out my hand. The kitten comes closer, delicately sniffs my fingers, and gives me a welcoming headbutt.

I laugh. "You're such a sweet girl." I squat down to scratch her under her chin. She nips my finger, a playful love bite. "Aren't you the most *purr*-fect little baby? I feel so *fur*-tunate to have met you."

She gives me a disdainful look and turns away. I think she understands puns.

"Come on, I was just *kitten*." Another outraged glare. Then she jumps on a nearby cart, piled ceiling-high with boxes and heavy, precarious-looking equipment. "Where are you going?"

I squint, trying to figure out where she disappeared, and that's when I realize it. The piece of equipment? The precarious-looking one? It actually *is* precarious. And the cat poked it just enough to dislodge it. And it's falling on my head.

Right.

About.

Now.

I have less than three seconds to move away. Which is too bad, because my entire body is suddenly made of stone, unresponsive to my brain's commands. I stand there, terrified, paralyzed, and close my eyes as a jumbled chaos of thoughts twists through my head. *Is the cat okay? Am I going to die? Oh God, I* am *going to die. Squashed by a tungsten anvil like Wile E. Coyote. I am a twenty-first century Pierre Curie, about to get my skull crushed by a horse-drawn cart. Except that I have no chair in the physics department of the University of Paris to leave to my lovely spouse, Marie. Except that I have barely done a tenth of all the science I meant to do. Except that I wanted so many things and I never oh my God any second now—*

Something slams into my body, shoving me aside and into the wall.

Everything is pain.

For a couple of seconds. Then the pain is over, and everything is *noise*: metal clanking as it plunges to the floor, horrified screaming, a shrill "meow" somewhere in the distance, and, closer to my ear . . . someone is panting. Less than an inch from me.

I open my eyes, gasping for breath, and . . .

Green.

All I can see is green. Not dark, like the grass outside; not dull, like the pistachios I had on the plane. This green is light, piercing, intense. Familiar, but hard to place, not unlike—

Eyes. I'm looking up into the greenest eyes I've ever seen. Eyes that I've seen before. Eyes surrounded by wavy black hair and a face that's angles and sharp edges and full lips, a face that's offensively, imperfectly handsome. A face attached to a large, solid body—a body that is pinning me to the wall, a body made of a broad chest and two thighs that could moonlight as redwoods. Easily. One is slotted between my legs and it's holding me up. Unyielding. This man even smells like a forest—and *that mouth*. That mouth is still breathing heavily on top of me, probably from the effort of whisking me off from under seven hundred pounds of mechanical engineering tools, and—

I *know* that mouth.

Levi.

Levi.

I haven't seen Levi Ward in six years. Six blessed, blissful years. And now here he is, pushing me into a wall in the middle of NASA's Space Center, and he looks . . . he looks . . .

"Levi!" someone yells. The clanking goes silent. What was meant to fall has settled on the floor. "Are you okay?"

Levi doesn't move, nor does he look away. His mouth works, and so does his throat. His lips part to say something, but no sound comes out. Instead a hand, at once rushed and gentle, reaches up to cup my face. It's so large, I feel perfectly cradled. Engulfed in green, cozy warmth. I whimper when it leaves my skin, a plaintive, involuntary sound from deep in my throat, but I stop when I realize that it's only shifting to the back of my skull. To the hollow of my collarbone. To my brow, pushing back my hair.

It's a cautious touch. Pressing but delicate. Lingering but urgent. As though he is studying me. Trying to make sure that I'm all in one piece. Memorizing me.

I lift my eyes, and for the first time I notice the deep, unmasked concern in Levi's eyes.

His lips move, and I think that, maybe—is he mouthing my name? Once, and then again? Like it's some kind of prayer?

"Levi? Levi, is she—"

My eyelids fall closed, and everything goes dark.

Photo courtesy of the author

Ali Hazelwood is the *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Love Hypothesis*, as well as the writer of peer-reviewed articles about brain science, in which no one makes out and the ever after is not always happy. Originally from Italy, she lived in Germany and Japan before moving to the U.S. to pursue a Ph.D. in neuroscience. She recently became a professor, which absolutely terrifies her. When Ali is not at work, she can be found running, eating cake pops, or watching sci-fi movies with her two feline overlords (and her slightly-less-feline husband).

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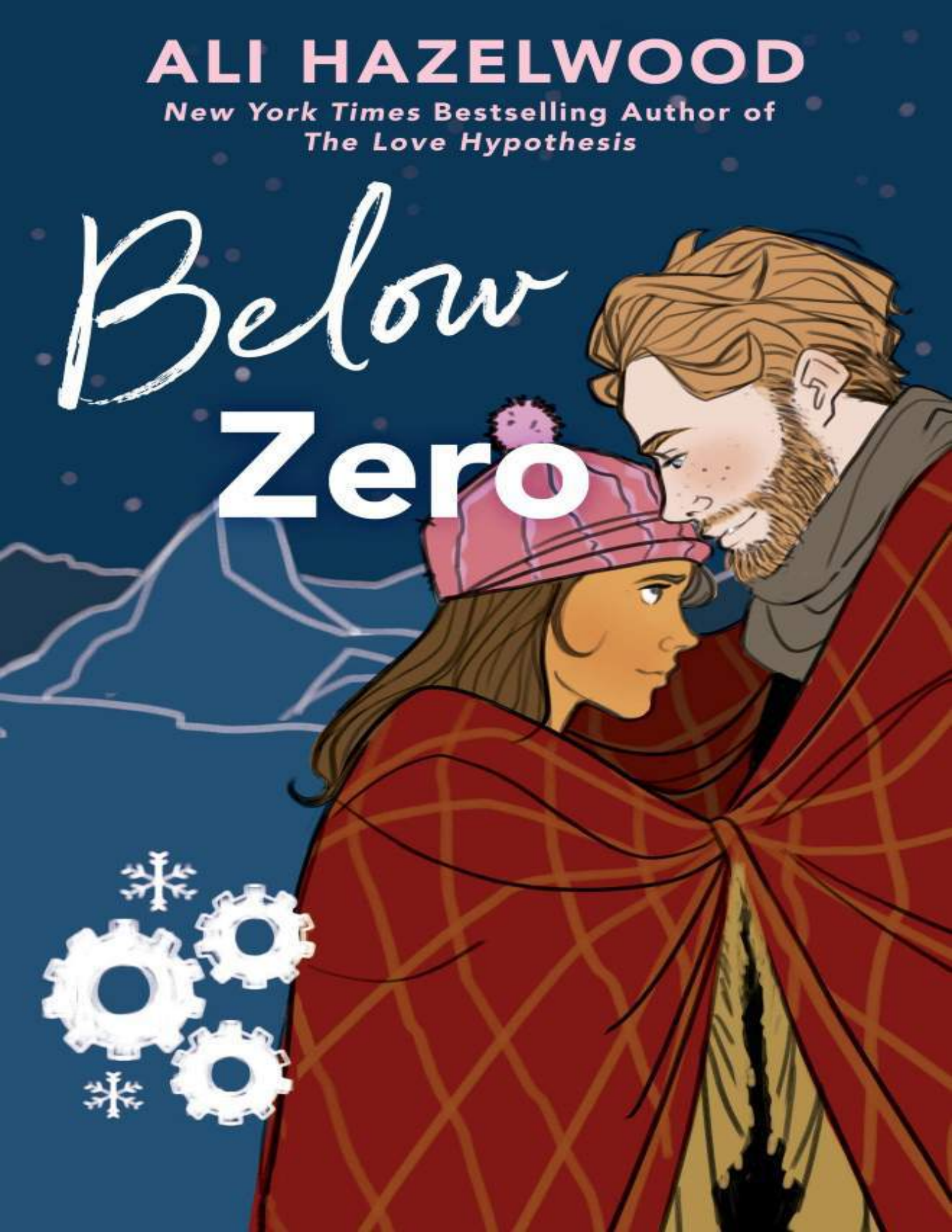
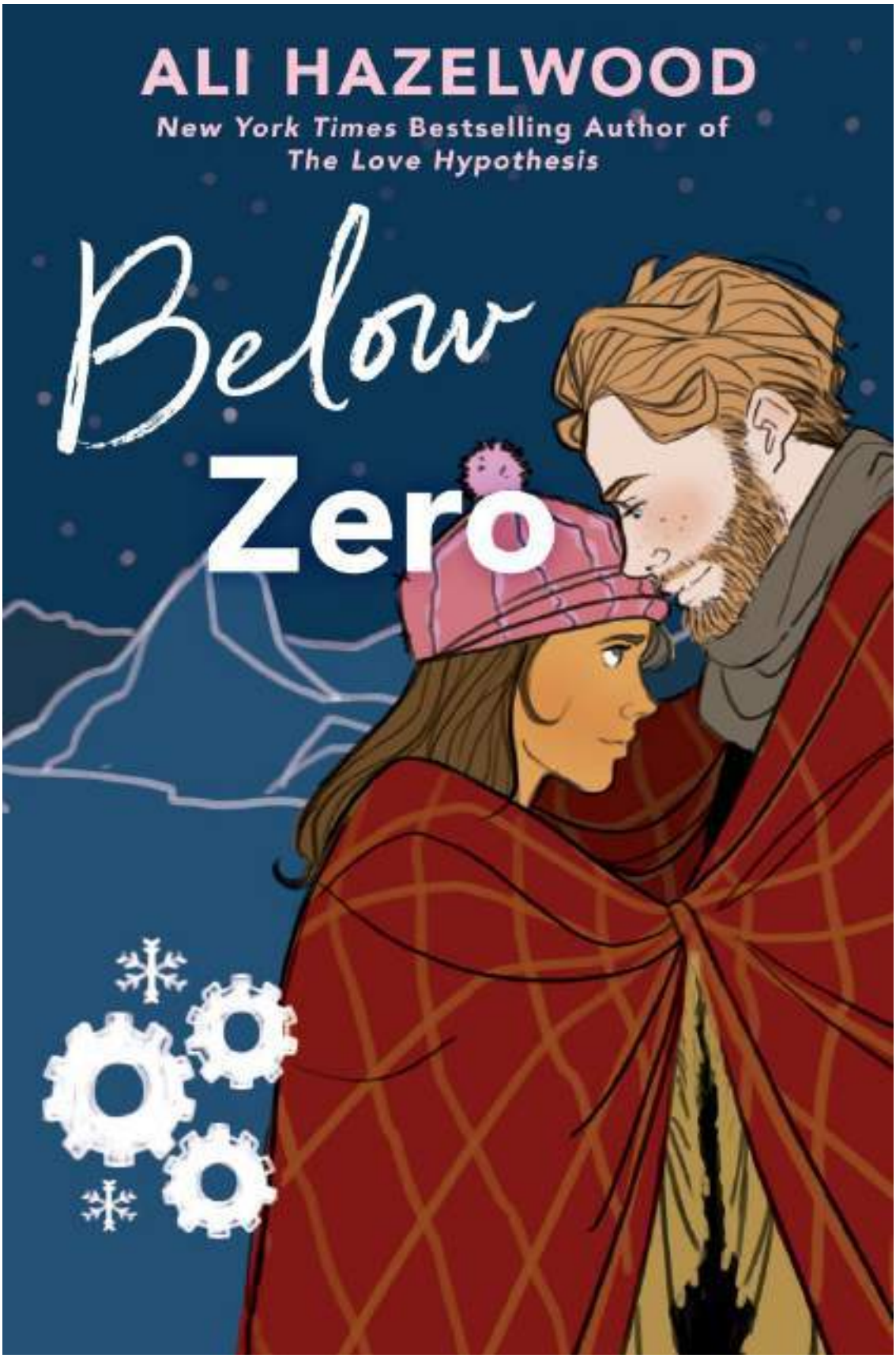
ALI HAZELWOOD

New York Times Bestselling Author of
The Love Hypothesis

Below Zero




ALI HAZELWOOD
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PRAISE FOR
The Love Hypothesis

“Contemporary romance’s unicorn: the elusive marriage of deeply brainy and delightfully escapist. . . . *The Love Hypothesis* has wild commercial appeal, but the quieter secret is that there is a specific audience, made up of all the Olives in the world, who have deeply, ardently waited for this exact book.”

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“Funny, sexy, and smart. Ali Hazelwood did a terrific job with *The Love Hypothesis*.”

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“With whip-smart and endearing characters, snappy prose, and a quirky take on a favorite trope, Hazelwood convincingly navigates

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Titles by Ali Hazelwood

The Love Hypothesis

LOATHE TO LOVE YOU

Under One Roof

Stuck with You

Below Zero

Below Zero

Ali Hazelwood

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Excerpt from Love on the Brain
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For Shep and Celia. Still with no polar bears, but with lots of love.

Prologue

Svalbard Islands, Norway
Present

I dream of an ocean.

Not the Arctic, though. Not the one right here in Norway, with its close-packed, frothy waves constantly crashing against the coasts of the Svalbard archipelago. It's perhaps a bit unfair of me: the Barents Sea is perfectly worth dreaming of. So are its floating icebergs and inhospitable permafrost shores. All around me there is nothing but stark, cerulean beauty, and if this is the place where I die, alone and shivering and bruised and pretty damn hungry . . . well, I have no reason to bitch.

After all, blue was always my favorite color.

And yet, the dreams seem to disagree. I lie here, in my half-awake, half-unconscious state. I feel my body yield precious degrees of heat. I watch the ultraviolet morning light reach inside the crevasse that trapped me hours ago, and the only ocean I can dream of is the one on Mars.

"Dr. Arroyo? Can you hear me?"

I mean, this entire thing is almost laughable. I am a NASA scientist. I have a doctorate in aerospace engineering and several publications in the field of planetary geology. At any given time, my brain is a jumbled maelstrom of stray thoughts on massive volcanism, crystal fluid dynamics, and the exact kind of anti-radiation equipment one would need to start a medium-size human colony on Kepler-452b. I promise I'm not being conceited when I say that I know pretty much all there is to know about Mars. Including the fact

that there are no oceans on it, and the idea that there ever were is highly controversial among scientists.

So, yeah. My near-death dreams are ridiculous *and* scientifically inaccurate. I would laugh about it, but I have a sprained ankle and I'm approximately ten feet below the ground. It seems better to just save my energy for what's to come. I never really believed in an afterlife, but who knows? Better hedge my bets.

"Dr. Arroyo, do you copy?"

The problem is, it calls to me, this nonexistent ocean on Mars. I feel the pull of it deep inside my belly, and it warms me even here, at the icy tip of the world. Its turquoise waters and rust-tinted coastlines are approximately 200 million kilometers from the place where I'll die and rot, but I cannot shake the feeling that they want me closer. There is an ocean, a network of gullies, an entire giant planet full of iron oxide, and they're all calling to me. Asking me to give up. Lean in. Let go.

"Dr. Arroyo."

And then there are the voices. Random, improbable voices from my past. Well, okay: *a* voice. It's always the same, deep and rumbling, with no discernible accent and well-pronounced consonants. I don't really mind it, I must say. I'm not sure why my brain has decided to impose it on me just now, considering that it belongs to someone who doesn't like me much—someone I might like even less—but it's a pretty good voice. A+. Worth listening to in a death's door situation. Even though Ian Floyd was the one who never wanted me to come here to Svalbard in the first place. Even though the last time we were together he was stubborn, and unkind, and unreasonable, and now he seems to sound only . . .

"Hannah."

Close. Is this really Ian Floyd? Sounding *close*?

Impossible. My brain has frozen into stupidity. It must really be all over for me. My time has come, the end is nigh, and—

"Hannah. I'm coming for you."

My eyes spring open. I'm not dreaming anymore.

Chapter 1

Johnson Space Center, Houston, U.S.
One year ago

On my very first day at NASA, at some point between the HR intake and a tour of the Electromagnetic Compliance Studies building, some overzealous newly hired engineer turns to the rest of us and asks, “Don’t you feel like your entire life has led you to this moment? Like you were *meant* to be here?”

Aside from Eager Beaver, there are fourteen of us starting today. Fourteen of us fresh out of top-five graduate programs, and prestigious internships, and CV-beefing industry jobs accepted exclusively to look more attractive during NASA’s next round of recruitment. There’re fourteen of us, and the thirteen that aren’t me are all nodding enthusiastically.

“Always knew I’d end up at NASA, ever since I was like, five,” says a shy-looking girl. She’s been sticking by my side for the entire morning, I assume because we’re the only two non-dudes in the group. I must say, I don’t mind it too much. Perhaps it’s because she’s a computer engineer while I’m aerospace, which means there’s a good chance that I won’t see much of her after today. Her name is Alexis, and she’s wearing a NASA necklace on top of a NASA T-shirt that only barely covers the NASA tattoo on her upper arm. “I bet it’s the same for you, Hannah,” she adds, and I smile at her, because Sadie and Mara insisted that I shouldn’t be my resting-bitch self now that we live in different time zones. They are convinced that I need to make new friends, and I have reluctantly agreed to put in a solid effort just to get them to shut up. So I nod at Alexis like I know exactly what she means, while privately I think: *Not really.*

When people find out that I have a Ph.D., they tend to assume that I was always an academically driven child. That I cruised through school my entire life in a constant effort to overachieve. That I did so well as a student, I decided to remain one long after I could have booked it and freed myself from the shackles of homework and nights spent cramming for never-ending tests. People assume, and for the most part I let them believe what they want. Caring what others think is a lot of work, and—with a handful of exceptions—I'm not a huge fan of work.

The truth, though, is quite the opposite. I hated school at first sight—with the direct consequence that school hated the sullen, listless child that I was right back. In the first grade, I refused to learn how to write my name, even though *Hannah* is only three letters repeated twice. In junior high, I set a school record for the highest number of consecutive detention days—what happens when you decide to take a stand and not do homework for any of your classes because they are too boring, too difficult, too useless, or all of the above. Until the end of my sophomore year, I couldn't wait to graduate and leave all of school behind: the books, the teachers, the grades, the cliques. Everything. I didn't really have a plan for *after*, except for leaving *now* behind.

I had this feeling, my entire life, that I was never going to be *enough*. I internalized pretty early that I was never going to be as good, as smart, as lovable, as wanted as my perfect older brother and my flawless older sister, and after several failed attempts at measuring up, I just decided to stop trying. Stop caring, too. By the time I was in my teens, I just wanted . . .

Well. To this day, I'm not sure what I wanted at fifteen. For my parents to stop fretting about my inadequacies, maybe. For my peers to stop asking me how I could be the sibling of two former all-star valedictorians. I wanted to stop feeling as though I were rotting in my own aimlessness, and I wanted my head to stop spinning all the time. I was confused, contradictory, and, looking back, probably a shitty teenager to be around. Sorry, Mom and Dad and the rest of the world. No hard feelings, eh?

Anyhow, I was a pretty lost kid. Until Brian McDonald, a junior, decided that asking me to homecoming by opening with “Your eyes are as blue as a sunset on Mars” might get me to say yes.

For the record, it’s a horrifying pickup line. Do not recommend. Use sparingly. Use not at all, especially if—like me—the person you’re trying to pick up has brown eyes and is fully aware of it. But what was an undeniable low point in the history of flirting ended up serving, if you’ll forgive a very self-indulgent metaphor, as a meteorite of sorts: it crashed into my life and changed its trajectory.

In the following years, I would find out that all of my colleagues at NASA have their own origin story. Their very own space rock that altered the course of their existence and pushed them to become engineers, physicists, biologists, astronauts. It’s usually an elementary school trip to the Kennedy Space Center. A Carl Sagan book under the Christmas tree. A particularly inspiring science teacher at summer camp. My encounter with Brian McDonald falls under that umbrella. It just happens to involve a guy who (allegedly) went on to moderate incel message boards on Reddit, which makes it just a tad lamer.

People obsessed with space are split into two distinct camps. The ones who want to *go* to space and crave the zero gravity, the space suits, drinking their own recycled urine. And there’re people like me: what we want—oftentimes what we’ve wanted since our frontal lobes were still undeveloped enough to have us thinking that toe shoes are a good fashion statement—is to *know* about space. At the beginning it’s simple stuff: What’s it made of? Where does it end? Why do the stars not fall and crash onto our heads? Then, once you’ve read enough, the big topics come in: Dark matter. Multiverse. Black holes. That’s when you realize how little we understand about this giant thing we’re part of. When you start thinking about whether you can help produce some new knowledge.

And that’s how you end up at NASA.

So, back to Brian McDonald. I didn’t go to homecoming with him. (I didn’t go to homecoming at all, because it wasn’t really my scene, and even if it had been, I was grounded for failing an English midterm, and even if I hadn’t been, fuck Brian McDonald and his

poorly researched pickup lines.) However, something about the whole thing stuck with me. Why would a sunset be blue? And on a red planet, no less? It seemed like something worth knowing. So I spent the night in my room, googling dust particles in the Martian atmosphere. By the end of the week, I'd signed up for a library card and devoured three books. By the end of the month, I was studying calculus to understand concepts like thrust over time and harmonic series. By the end of the year, I had a goal. Hazy, confused, not yet fully defined, but a goal nonetheless.

For the first time in my life.

I'll spare you most of the grueling details, but I spent the rest of high school busting ass to make up for the ass I hadn't busted for the previous decade. Just picture an '80s training montage, but instead of running in the snow and doing pull-ups with a repurposed broomstick, I was hard at work on books and YouTube lectures. And it was *hard* work: wanting to understand concepts like H-R diagrams or synodic periods or syzygy did not make them any easier to grasp. Before, I'd never really *tried*. But at the tender age of sixteen, I was confronted with the unbearable turmoil that comes with trying your best and realizing that sometimes it simply isn't enough. As much as it pains me to say it, I don't have an IQ of 130. To really understand the books I wanted to read, I had to review the same concepts over, and over, and fucking *over* again. Initially I coasted on the high of finding out! new! things!, but after a while my motivation began to wane, and I started to wonder what I was even doing. I was studying a bunch of really basic science stuff, to be able to graduate to more advanced science stuff, so that one day I'd actually know all the science stuff about Mars and . . . and what then? Go on *Jeopardy!* and pick Space for 500? Didn't really seem worth it.

Then August of 2012 happened.

When the *Curiosity* rover approached the Martian atmosphere, I stayed up until one A.M. I chugged down two bottles of Diet Coke, ate peanuts for good luck, and when the landing maneuver began, I bit into my lip until it bled. The moment it safely touched the ground I screamed, I laughed, I cried, and then got grounded for a week for

waking up the entire household the night before my brother left for his Peace Corps trip, but I didn't care.

In the following months I devoured every little piece of news NASA issued on *Curiosity*'s mission, and as I wondered about who was behind the images of the Gale Crater, the interpretation of the raw data, the reports on the molecular composition of the Aeolis Palus, my hazy, undefinable goal began to solidify.

NASA.

NASA was the place to be.

The summer between junior and senior years, I found a ranking of the hundred best engineering programs in the U.S. and decided to apply to the top twenty. "You should probably extend your reach. Add a few safety schools," my guidance counselor told me. "I mean, your SATs are really good and your GPA has improved a lot, but you have a bunch of"—long pause for throat clearing—"academic red flags on your permanent record."

I thought about it for a minute. Who would have figured that being a little shit for the first one and a half decades of my life would bring lasting consequences? Not me. "Okay. Fine. Let's do the top thirty-five."

As it turns out, I didn't need to. I got accepted to a whopping (drumroll, please) . . . one top-twenty school. A real winner, huh? I don't know if they misfiled my application, misplaced half of my transcripts, or had a brain fart in which the entire admissions office temporarily forgot what a promising student is supposed to look like. I put down my deposit and approximately forty-five seconds after getting my letter told Georgia Tech that I'd be attending.

No backsies.

So I moved to Atlanta, and I gave it my all. I chose the majors and the minors I knew NASA would want to see on a CV. I got the federal internships. I studied hard enough to ace the tests, did the fieldwork, applied to grad school, wrote the thesis. When I look back at the last ten years, school and work and schoolwork are pretty much all that stand out—with the notable exception of meeting Sadie and Mara, and of begrudgingly watching them carve spots for themselves in my heart. God, they take up *so much room*.

“It’s like space is your whole personality,” the girl I casually hooked up with during most of my sophomore year of undergrad told me. It was after I explained that no, thank you, I wasn’t interested in going out for coffee to meet her friends because of a lecture on Kalpana Chawla I was planning to attend. “Do you have any other interests?” she asked. I threw her a quick “Nope,” waved good-bye, and wasn’t too surprised when, the following week, she didn’t reply to my offer to meet up. After all, I clearly couldn’t give her what she wanted.

“Is this really enough for you? Just having sex with me when you feel like it and ignoring me the rest of the time?” the guy I slept with during the last semester of my Ph.D. asked. “You just seem . . . I don’t know. *Extremely* emotionally unavailable.” I think maybe he was right, because it’s barely been a year and I can’t quite recall his face.

Exactly a decade after Brian McDonald miscolored my eyes, I applied for a NASA position. I got an interview, then a job offer, and now I’m here. But unlike the other new hires, I don’t feel like Mars and I were always meant to be. There was no guarantee, no invisible string of destiny tethering me to this job, and I’m positive that I made my way here through sheer brute force, but does it matter?

Nope. Not even a little bit.

So I turn to look at Alexis. This time, her NASA necklace, her T-shirt, her tattoo—they pull a sincere smile out of me. It’s been a long journey here. The destination was never a sure thing, but I have arrived, and I’m uncharacteristically, sincerely, satisfyingly happy. “Feels like home,” I say, and the enthusiastic way she nods reverberates deep down inside my chest.

At one point in history, every single member of the Mars Exploration Program had their first day at NASA, too. They stood in the very spot where I’m standing right now. Gave their banking information for direct deposit, had an unflattering picture taken for their badges, shook hands with the HR reps. Complained about Houston’s weather, bought terrible coffee from the cafeteria, rolled their eyes at visitors doing touristy things, let the Saturn V rocket

take their breath away. Every single member of the Mars Exploration Program did this, just like I will.

I step into the conference room where some fancy NASA big shot is scheduled to talk to us, take in the window view of the Johnson Space Center and the remnants of objects that were once launched across the stars, and feel like every single inch of this place is thrilling, fascinating, electrifying, intoxicating.

Perfect.

Then I turn around. And, of course, find the very last person I wanted to see.

Chapter 2

Caltech Campus, Pasadena, California
Five years, six months ago

I'm finishing my initial semester of grad school when I first meet Ian Floyd, and it's Helena Harding's fault.

Dr. Harding is a lot of things: my friend Mara's Ph.D. mentor; one of the most celebrated environmental scientists of the twenty-first century; a generally crabby human being; and, last but not least, my Water Resources Engineering professor.

It is, quite honestly, an all-around shitty class: mandatory; irrelevant to my academic, professional, or personal interests; and highly focused on the intersection of the hydrologic cycle and the design of urban storm-sewer systems. For the most part, I spend the lectures wishing I were anywhere else: in line at the DMV, at the market buying magic beans, taking Analytical Transonic and Supersonic Aerodynamics. I do the least I can to pull a low B—which, in the unjust scam of graduate school, is the minimum passing grade—until week three or four of classes, when Dr. Harding introduces a new, cruel assignment that has fuck all to do with water.

"Find someone who has the engineering job you want at the end of your Ph.D. and do an informational interview with them," she tells us. "Then write a report about it. Due by the end of the semester. Don't come to me bitching about it during office hours, because I *will* call security to escort you out." I have a feeling that she's looking at me while saying it. It's probably just my guilty conscience.

"Honestly, I'm just going to ask Helena if I can interview *her*. But if you want, I think I have a cousin or something at NASA's Jet Propulsion Lab," Mara says offhandedly later that day, while we're

sitting on the steps outside the Beckman Auditorium having a quick lunch before heading back to our labs.

I wouldn't say that we're close, but I've decided that I like her. A lot. At this point, my grad school attitude is some mild variant of *I did not come here to make friends*: I don't feel in competition with the rest of the program, but neither am I particularly invested in anything that isn't my work in the aeronautics lab, including getting acquainted with other students, or, you know . . . learning their names. I'm fairly sure that my lack of interest is strongly broadcasted, but either Mara didn't pick up the transmission, or she's gleefully ignoring it. She and Sadie found each other in the first couple of days, and then, for reasons I don't fully understand, decided to find me.

Hence Mara sitting next to me, telling me about her JPL contacts.

"A cousin or something?" I ask, curious. It seems a bit sketchy. "You *think*?"

"Yeah, I'm not sure." She shrugs and continues to make her way through a Tupperware of broccoli, an apple, and approximately two fucktons of Cheez-Its. "I don't really know much about him. His parents divorced, then people in my family had arguments and stopped talking to each other. There was a lot of prime Floyd dysfunction happening, so I haven't actually spoken to him in years. But I heard from one of my other cousins that he was working on that thing that landed on Mars back when we were in high school. It was called something like . . . *Contingency*, or *Carpentry*, or *Crudity*—"

"The *Curiosity* rover?"

"Yes! Maybe?"

I put my sandwich down. Swallow my bite. Clear my throat. "Your cousin *or something* was on the *Curiosity* rover team."

"I think so. Do the dates add up? Maybe it was some kind of summer internship? But honestly, it might just be Floyd family lore. I have an aunt who insists that we're related to the Finnish royals, and according to Wikipedia there are no Finnish royals. So." She shrugs and pops another handful of Cheez-Its in her mouth. "Would you like me to ask around, though? For the assignment?"

I nod. And I don't think much about it until a month or so later. By then, through means that I am still unable to divine, Mara and Sadie

have managed to worm their way into my heart, causing me to amend my previous *I did not come here to make friends* stance to a slightly altered *I did not come here to make friends, but hurt my weird Cheez-It friend or my other weird soccer friend and I will beat you up with a lead pipe till you piss blood for the rest of your life.* Truculent? Perhaps. I feel little, but surprisingly deeply.

"By the way, I sent you my cousin-or-something's contact info a while ago," Mara tells me one night. We're at the cheapest grad bar we've been able to find. She's on her second Midori sour of the night. "Did you get it?"

I raise my eyebrow. "Is that the random string of numbers you emailed me three days ago? With no subject line, no text, no explanations? The one I figured was just you tracking your lottery dream numbers?"

"Sounds like it, yeah."

Sadie and I exchange a long look.

"Hey, you ungrateful goblin, I had to call about fifteen people I'd sworn never to talk to again to get Ian's number. *And*, I had to have my evil great-aunt Delphina promise to blackmail him into saying yes once you reach out to ask for a meeting. So you better use that number, and you better play the Mega Millions."

"If you win," Sadie added, "we split three ways."

"Of course." I hide my smile in my glass. "What's he like, anyway?"

"Who?"

"The cousin-or-something. Ian, you said?"

"Yup. Ian Floyd." Mara thinks about it for a second. "Can't really say, because I've met him at like, two Thanksgivings fifteen years ago, before his parents split. Then his mom moved him to Canada and . . . I don't even know, honestly. The only thing I remember is that he was tall. But he was also a few years older than me? So maybe he's actually three feet. Oh, also, his hair is more brown? Which is kind of rare for a Floyd. I know it's scientifically unsound, but our brand of ginger is *not* recessive."

Great-Aunt Delphina's emotional manipulation game is clearly on point, because when my assignment's deadline approaches and I

text Ian Floyd in a panic, asking for an informational interview—whatever the hell *that* is—he replies within hours with an enthusiastic:

Ian: Sure.

Hannah: Thanks. I'm assuming you're in Houston. Should we do virtual? Skype? Zoom? FaceTime?

Ian: I'm in Pasadena at JPL for the next three days, but virtual works.

The Jet Propulsion Lab. Hmm.

I drum my fingers on my mattress, pondering. Virtual would be so much easier. And it would be shorter. But as much as I hate the idea of writing a report for Helena's class, I do want to ask this guy a million questions about *Curiosity*. Plus, he's Mara's mysterious relative, and my curiosity is piqued.

No pun intended.

Hannah: Let's meet in person. The least I can do is buy you coffee. Sound good?

No reply for a few minutes. And then, a very succinct That works. For some reason, it makes me smile.

• • •

My first thought upon entering the coffee shop is that Mara is full of shit.

To the brim.

The second: I should really double-check the text Ian sent me. Make sure that he really said I'll be wearing jeans and a gray t-shirt like I seem to remember. Of course, it would be a little redundant, especially considering that the coffee shop where he asked to meet is currently populated by only three people: a barista, busy doing a

pen-and-paper sudoku like it's 2007; me, standing in the entrance and looking around, confused; and a man, sitting at the table closest to the entrance, gazing pensively through the glass windows.

He's wearing jeans and a gray T-shirt, which would suggest: Ian. The problem . . .

His hair is the problem. Because, despite what Mara said, it's most definitely *not* brown. Maybe a fraction of a shade darker than her bright, carroty orange, but . . . really *not* brown. I'm ready to dial her number and demand to know what ridiculous ginger scale the Floyds operate on when the man slowly stands and asks, "Hannah?"

I have no idea how tall Ian is, but he's much closer to eight feet than to three. And I find it very interesting that Mara claims to barely know him, considering that they look like they could be siblings, not just because of the aggressively red hair, but also the dark-blue eyes, and the dusting of freckles over pale skin, and . . .

I blink. Then I blink again. If three seconds ago someone had asked me whether I'm the type to multiple blink at the sight of some guy, I'd have laughed in their face. *This* guy, though . . .

I guess I stand corrected.

"Ian?" I smile, recovering from the surprise. "Mara's cousin?"

He frowns, as if momentarily blanking on Mara's name. "Ah, yes." He nods. Only once. "Apparently," he adds, which makes me laugh. He waits for me to take a seat across from him before folding back in his chair. I notice that he doesn't hold out his hand, nor does he smile. Interesting. "Thank you for agreeing to meet with me."

"No problem." His voice is low-pitched but clear. Deep timbre. Confident; polite but not too friendly. I'm usually fairly good at reading people, and my guess for him is that he's not quite enthused to be here. He'd probably rather be doing whatever it is that he came to California to do, but he's a nice guy, and he's planning to make a valiant effort to avoid letting me know.

He just doesn't seem to be particularly good at faking it, which is . . . kinda cute.

"I hope I didn't mess up your day."

He shakes his head—an obvious lie—and I take the opportunity to study him. He seems . . . quiet. The silent type, aloof, a little stiff.

Big, more lumberjack than engineer. I briefly wonder if he's military personnel, but the day-old stubble on his face tells me it's unlikely.

And such an intriguing, handsome face it is. His nose looks like it was broken at some point, maybe in a fight or a sports injury, and never bothered to heal back quite perfectly. His hair—*red*—is short and a little mussed, more *I've been up working since six A.M.* than artful styling. I watch him scratch his—*big*—neck, then cross his—*wide*—biceps on his—*broad*—chest. He gives me a patient, expectant look, like he's fully committed to answering all my questions.

He is, physically, the opposite of me. Of my small bones and tanned complexion. My hair, eyes, sometimes even my *soul*, are black-hole dark. And here he is, Martian red and ocean blue.

"What can I get you?" a voice asks. I turn and find Sudoku Boy standing right next to our table. Right. Coffee place. Where people consume beverages.

"Iced tea, please."

He walks away without a word and I look at Ian once again. I'm itching to text Mara. Your cousin looks like a slightly jacked version of Prince Harry. Maybe you should have kept in touch?

"So." I cross my hands and lean my elbows on the table. "What does she have on you?"

He tilts his head. "She?"

"Great-Aunt Delphina." He blinks twice. I smile and continue, "I mean, it's a Thursday afternoon. You're in California for a handful of days. I'm sure you have something better to do than meet up with your long-lost cousin's friend."

His eyes widen for a split second. Then his expression levels back to neutral. "It's fine."

"Is it an embarrassing baby pic?"

He shakes his head. "I don't mind helping out."

"I see. A baby *video*, then?"

He's silent for a moment before saying, "As I said, it's not a problem." He looks like he isn't used to people pushing him, which is unsurprising. There is something subtly removed about him. Vaguely

distant and intimidating. Like he's not *quite* reachable. It makes me want to get closer and poke.

"A baby video of you . . . running around in the kiddie pool? Picking your nose? Rummaging around the back of your diaper?"

"I—"

Sudoku Boy drops off my iced tea in a plastic cup. Ian's eyes follow him for a few seconds, then return to mine with an interesting mix of stoic resignation. "It was more of a toddler video," he says cautiously, like he's surprising even himself.

"Ah." I grin into my tea. It's both too sweet and too sour. With a subtle aftertaste of gross. "Do tell."

"You don't want to know."

"Oh, I'm positive I do."

"It's bad."

"You're really selling it to me."

The left corner of his mouth curves upward, a small hint of amusement that's not quite fully there yet. I have an odd stray thought: *I bet his smile is lopsided. Beautiful, too.* "The video was taken at a Lowe's. With my older brother's new camcorder, sometime in the late '90s," he tells me.

"At a Lowe's? Can't be *that* bad, then."

He sighs, impassive. "I was around three or four. And they had one of those bathroom displays. The ones with model sinks and showers and vanities. And toilets, naturally."

I press my lips together. This is going to be fun. "Naturally."

"I don't really remember what happened, but apparently I needed to use the restroom. And when I saw the display I was . . . inspired."

"No way."

"In my defense, I was very young."

He scratches his nose, and I laugh. "Oh my God."

"With no concept of sewage systems."

"Right. Sure. Honest mistake." I cannot stop laughing. "How did Great-Aunt Delphina get a copy of the video?"

"Officially: unclear. But I'm fairly sure my brother made CDs of it. Sent them to local TV stations and whatnot." He gestures vaguely, and his forearm is dusted with freckles and pale-red hair. I want to

grab his wrist, hold it in front of my eyes, study it at my leisure. Trace, smell, touch. “I haven’t spent a holiday with the Floyd side of the family in twenty years, but I’m told that the video is a source of great entertainment for all age groups at Thanksgiving.”

“I bet it’s the pièce de résistance. I bet they press play right after the turducken comes out.”

“Yeah. You’d probably win.” He seems quietly resigned. A big man with a put-upon-but-enduring air. In an utterly charming way.

“But how do you blackmail someone from this? How much worse can it get?”

He sighs again. His broad shoulders lift, then fall. “When my aunt called, she briefly mentioned uploading it on Facebook. Tagging the NASA official page.”

I gasp into my hand. I shouldn’t laugh. This is horrible. But. “Are you serious?”

“It’s not a healthy family.”

“No shit.”

He shrugs, like he’s past caring. “At least they’re not trying to extort money out of me yet.”

“Right.” I nod solemnly and collect my features into what hopefully passes for a compassionate, respectful expression. “The assignment I told you about is for my Water Resources class, so this is surprisingly on topic. And I am truly sorry that you got stuck with meeting your little cousin’s friend because you publicly urinated in a Lowe’s when you barely knew how to talk.”

Ian’s eyes settle on me, as if to size me up. I thought I had his full attention from the moment I sat down, but I realize that I was wrong. For the first time, he’s looking at me like he’s interested in actually *seeing* me. He studies me, assesses me, and my first impression of him—*detached, distant*—instantly evaporates. There is something nearly palpable about his presence: a warm, tingling sensation climbing up my spine.

“I don’t mind,” he says again. I smile, because I know that this time he means it.

“Good.” I push my tea to the side. “So, what would you be doing right now, if three-year-old you had known about sanitary sewers?”

This time his smile is a tad more defined. I'm winning him over, which is good, very good, because I'm rapidly developing a thing for the contrast between his eyelashes (*red!*) and his deep-set eyes (*blue!*). "I'd probably be running a bunch of tests."

"At the Jet Propulsion Lab?"

He nods.

"Tests on . . . ?"

"A rover."

"Oh." My heart skips three beats. "For space exploration?"

"Mars."

I lean closer, not even bothering to play it like I'm not avidly interested. "Is that your current project?"

"One of them, yeah."

"And what are the tests for?"

"Mostly attitude, figuring out where the ship is positioned in three-dimensional space. Pointing, too."

"You work on a gyroscope?"

"Yes. My team is perfecting the gyroscope so that once the rover is on Mars, it knows where it is, what it's looking at. Informs the other systems about its coordinates and movements, too."

My heart is now fully pitter-pattering. This sounds . . . wow. Pornographic, almost. Exactly my jam. "And you do this in Houston? At the Space Center?"

"Usually. But I come up here when there are issues. I've been struggling with the imagery, and the feed update keeps lagging even though it shouldn't, and—" He shakes his head, as if catching himself halfway through a rant that's been playing over and over in his mind. But I finally know what he'd rather be doing.

And I sure can't blame him.

"Did they send your entire team here?" I ask.

He tilts his head, like he has no idea where I'm going with this. "Just me."

"So your team leader is not around."

"My team leader?"

"Yeah. Is your boss around?"

He is silent for a second. Two. Three. Four? What the— Ah.

“You *are* the team leader,” I say.

He nods once. A little stiff. Almost apologetic.

“How old are you?” I ask.

“Twenty-five.” A pause. “Next month.”

Whoa. I’m twenty-two. “Isn’t that early to be a team leader?”

“I’m . . . not sure,” he says, even though I can tell that he *is* sure, and that he *is* exceptional, and that even though he knows it, the thought makes him more than a little uncomfortable. I picture myself saying something flirtatious and inappropriate back—*Wow, handsome* and *smart*—and wonder how he’d react. Probably not well.

Not that I’m going to hit on my informational interviewee. Even *I* know better. Plus, he’s not really my type.

“Okay, what’s the security like at JPL?” I’ve never been. I know it’s loosely connected with Caltech, but that’s about it.

“Depends,” he says cautiously, like he still cannot follow my train of thought.

“What about your office? Is it a restricted area?”

“No. Why—”

“Awesome, then.” I stand, dig into my pockets for a few dollars to leave next to my unfinished tea, and then close my fingers around Ian’s wrist. His skin glows with warmth and taut muscles as I pull him up from the table, and even though he’s probably twice as big and ten times stronger than me, he lets me lead him away from the table. I let go of him the second we’re out of the coffee shop, but he keeps following me.

“Hannah? What—where . . . ?”

“I don’t see why we can’t do this weird informational interview thing, get some work done, *and* have fun.”

“What?”

With a grin, I look at him over my shoulders. “Think of it as sticking it to evil Great-Aunt Delphina.”

I doubt he fully understands, but the corner of his mouth lifts again, and that’s good enough for me.

• • •

“See this thread right here? It’s mostly about the behavior of one of the rover’s sensors, the LN-200. We combine its information with the one provided by the encoders on the wheels to figure out positioning.”

“Huh. So the sensor *doesn’t* run constantly?”

Ian turns to me, away from the chunk of programming code he’s been showing me. We’re sitting in front of his triple-monitor computer, side by side at his desk, which is a giant, pristine expanse with a stunning view of the floodplain JPL was built on. When I mentioned how clean his workspace was, he pointed out that it’s only because it’s a guest office. But when I asked him if his usual desk back in Houston is any messier, he glanced away before the corner of his lip twitched.

I am almost certain he’s starting to think that I’m not a total waste of time.

“No, it doesn’t run constantly. How can you tell?”

I gesture toward the lines of code, and the back of my hand brushes against something hard and warm: Ian’s shoulder. We’re sitting closer than we were at the coffee shop, but no closer than I’d feel comfortable being with one of the—always unpleasant, often offensive—guys in my Ph.D. cohort. I guess my crossed knees kind of pressed against his leg earlier, but that’s it. No big deal. “It’s in there, no?”

The section is in C++. Which happens to be the very first language I taught myself back in high school, when every single Google search for “Skills + Necessary + NASA” led to the sad result of “Programming.” Python came after. Then SQL. Then HAL/S. For each language, I started out convinced that chewing on glass would surely be preferable. Then, at some point along the way, I began thinking in terms of functions, variables, conditional loops. A little after that, reading code became a bit like inspecting the label on the back of the conditioner bottle while showering: not particularly fun, but overall easy. I do have *some* talents, apparently.

“Yeah.” He’s still looking at me. Not surprised, precisely. Not impressed, either. Intrigued, maybe? “Yes, it is.”

I rest my chin on my palm and chew on my lower lip, considering the code. “Is it because of the limited amount of solar power?”

“Yes.”

“And I bet it prevents gyro drift errors during the stationary period?”

“Correct.” He nods, and I’m momentarily distracted by his jawline. Or maybe it’s the cheekbones. They’re defined, angular in a way that makes me wish I had a protractor in my pocket.

“It’s not all automated, right? Earth-based personnel can direct tools?”

“They can, depending on the attitude.”

“Does the onboard flight software have specific requirements?”

“The pointing of the antenna relative to the Earth, and . . .” He stops. His eyes fall on my chewed-on lip, then quickly move away. “You ask a lot of questions.”

I tilt my head. “*Bad* questions?”

Silence. “No.” More silence as he studies me. “Remarkably good questions.”

“Can I ask a few more, then?” I grin at him, aiming for cheeky, curious to see where it’ll take us.

He hesitates before nodding. “Can I ask you some, too?”

I laugh. “Like what? Would you like me to list the specs of the maze-solving bot I built for my Intro to Robotics class back in college?”

“You built a maze-solving robot?”

“Yup. Four-wheel, all-terrain, Bluetooth module. Solar powered. Her name was Ruthie, and when I set her free at a corn maze somewhere near Atlanta, she got out in about three minutes. Scared the crap out of the children, too.”

He is fully smiling now. He has a heart-stopping dimple on his left cheek, and . . . Okay, fine: he’s *aggressively* hot. Despite the red hair, or because of it. “You still have her?”

“Nope. To celebrate, I got wasted at a bar that didn’t bother to check IDs and ended up leaving her at some University of Georgia

frat house. I didn't want to go back, because those places are *scary*, so I gave up on Ruthie and just built an electronic arm for my Robotics final." I sigh and look into the mid-distance. "I'll need a lot of therapy before I can become a mother."

He chuckles. The sound is low, warm, maybe even shiver-inducing. I need a second to regroup.

I've settled—at some point on our five-minute walk here, probably when he pulled out a pretty effortless scowl to intimidate the security guard into letting me in despite my lack of ID—on the reason I can't quite pin Ian down. He is, very simply, a never-before-experienced mix of cute and overwhelmingly masculine. With a complex, layered air about him. It spells simultaneously *Do not piss me off because I don't fuck around* and *Ma'am, let me carry those groceries for you*.

Not my usual fare, not at all. I like flirting, and I like sex, and I like hooking up with people, but I'm really, *really* picky about my partners. It doesn't take a lot to turn me off someone, and I almost exclusively gravitate toward the cheerful, spontaneous, fun-loving type. I'm into extraverts who love banter and are easy to talk to, the less intense the better. Ian seems to be the diametrical opposite of that, and yet . . . And yet, even *I* can see how there is something fundamentally attractive about him. Would I try to pick him up at a bar? Hm. Unclear.

Will I try to pick him up after the end of this informational interview? Hm. *Also* unclear. I know I say I wouldn't, but . . . things change.

"Okay. My question now. Mara—Mara Floyd, your cousin or something—said that you were working directly on the *Curiosity* team?" He nods. "But you were, what? Eighteen?"

"Around that age, yeah."

"Were you an intern?"

He pauses before shaking his head but doesn't elaborate.

"So you just . . . happened to be hanging out with mission control? Chilling with your space bros while they landed their remote control rover on Mars?"

His lips twitch. "I was a team member."

“A team member at eighteen?” My eyebrow lifts, and he looks away.

“I . . . graduated early.”

“High school? Or college?”

Silence. “Both.”

“I see.”

He briefly scratches the side of his neck, and there again is this feeling that he’s not quite used to being asked questions about himself. That most people take a look at him, decide that he’s just a touch too aloof and detached, and give up on figuring him out.

I study him, more curious than ever. “So . . . were you one of those kids who was really advanced for their age and skipped half a dozen grades? And then ended up joining the workforce while still ridiculously young?” *And maybe your psychosocial development was still kind of ongoing, but you were never really sharing professional or academic settings with people in your age group, just much older ones who likely avoided you and were a little intimidated by your intelligence and success, which meant being the odd man out for the entirety of your formative years and having a 401(k) before your first date?*

His eyes widen. “I . . . Yeah. Were you one, too?”

I laugh. “Oh no. I was a total dumbass. Still am, for the most part. I just thought it might be a good guess.” It fits the persona, too. He doesn’t come across as insecure, not quite, but he’s cautious. Withdrawn.

I lean back in my chair, feeling the thrill of having puzzled him out a little better. I’m usually not this dedicated to figuring out the backstory of everyone I meet, but Ian is just interesting.

No. He’s *fascinating*.

“So, how was it?”

He blinks. “How was what?”

“Being there with mission control when *Curiosity* landed. How was it?”

His expression instantly transforms. “It was . . .” He’s staring down at his feet, as if remembering. He looks awestruck.

“*That* good?”

“Yeah. It was . . . Yeah.” He chuckles again. God, it really does sound great.

“It looked like it. From TV, I mean.”

“You watched it?”

“Yup. I was on the East Coast, so I stayed up late and all that. Looked up at the sky out of my bedroom window and cried a little bit.”

He nods, and suddenly *he* is studying *me*. “Is that why you’re in grad school? You want to work on future rovers?”

“That would be amazing. But anything that’s space exploration will do.”

“NASA can put your maze-solving skills to great use.” His dimple is back, and I laugh.

“Hey, I can do other things. For instance . . .” I point at the third monitor on the desk, the one farthest away from me. It displays a piece of code Ian hasn’t walked me through yet. “Want me to help you debug that?” He gives me a confused look. “What? It’s code. It’s always nice to have a second pair of eyes.”

“You don’t have to—”

“There’s an error on the fifth line.”

He frowns. Then he scans the code for a second. Then he turns to me, to the monitor, to me again with an even bigger frown. I brace, half expecting him to lash out defensively and deny the error. I’m familiar with the crumbling egos of men, and I’m pretty sure it’s what any of the guys in my Ph.D. class would do. But Ian surprises me: he nods, fixes the mistake I pointed out, and looks nothing but grateful.

Wow. A male engineer who’s *not* an asshole. The bar is pretty low, but I’m nevertheless impressed.

“Would you really be up for going through the rest of the code with me?” he asks cautiously, surprising me even more. The contrast between his gentle tone and how . . . how *big* and *guarded* he is almost has me smiling. “It’s the workaround to fix the two-second delay in the pointing issue. I was going to ask one of my engineers in Houston to debug, but . . .”

“I got you.” I roll my chair closer to Ian’s. My knee presses against his, and I nearly move it away automatically, but in a split-second

decision I decide to leave it there.

An experiment of sorts. Testing the waters. Taking the temperature.

I wait for him to shift back, but instead he studies me and says, “It’s a few hundred lines. I’m supposed to be helping *you*. Are you sure—”

“It’s fine. When I write my report, I’ll just pretend I asked you a bunch of questions about your journey and make up the answers.” Just to mess with him, I add, “Don’t worry, I’ll mention how having the clap did *not* set you back on your road to NASA.” He scowls, which has me laughing, and then I’m going over the code with him for five, ten minutes. Fifteen. The light softens to late-afternoon hues, and over an hour goes by while we’re side by side, blinking at the monitors.

Honestly, it’s pretty basic rubber duck debugging: he’s explaining out loud what he’s trying to do, which helps him work through critical chunks, and also figuring out better ways to go about it. But I’m a pretty happy rubber duck. I like listening to his low, even voice. I like that he seems to consider every single thing I say and never dismisses anything outright. I like that when he’s thinking hard, he closes his eyes, and his lashes are crimson half-moons against his skin. I like that he builds meticulously pristine code with no memory leakage, and I like that when his biceps brushes against my shoulder all I feel is solid warmth. I like his short, crisp functions, and the way he smells clean and masculine and a bit dark.

Okay. So he’s *not* my type.

I do like him, though.

Would Mara mind it if I shamelessly offered myself to her kin at the informational interview she kindly set up? I would normally just go for it, but this friendship business can be a bit of a burden. That said, maybe I can safely assume that she won’t care, considering that she doesn’t seem to know how exactly she and Ian are related.

Plus, she’s a generous soul. She’d want her friend and her cousin-or-something to get laid.

“Did you get randomly assigned to the Attitude and Position Estimation team?” I ask him when we get to the last few lines of

code.

“No.” He lets out a small laugh. His profile is a work of near perfection, even with the broken nose. “Clawed my way there, actually.”

“Oh?”

He saves and closes our work with a few rapid keystrokes. “For *Curiosity*, I joined the team pretty late into the development stage, and I mostly focused on launch.”

“Did you like it?”

“A lot.” He angles his chair to face me. Our knees, elbows, shoulders have been brushing so much, the closeness feels familiar by now. So does the liquid warmth under my belly button. “But after that I began working on *Perseverance* and I asked for a change. Something actually related to the rover being on Mars as opposed to three hours in Cape Canaveral.”

“So they put you on A & PE?”

“First, I joined the NASA expedition to Norway’s Mars Analog site.”

I inhale audibly. “AMASE?” The Arctic Mars Analog Svalbard Expedition (AMASE, for friends) is what happens when a bunch of nerds travel to Norway, in the Bockfjorden area of Svalbard. One might think that the North Pole has nothing to do with space, but because of all the volcanic activity and glaciers it’s actually the place on Earth most similar to Mars. It even has one-of-a-kind carbonate spherules that are almost identical to the ones we found on meteorites of Martian origin. NASA researchers like to use it as a location to test the functionality of equipment they plan to send on space exploration missions, collect samples, examine fun science questions that can prepare astronauts for future space missions.

I want to be part of it so bad, a shiver runs down my spine.

“Yup. When I came back I asked for an A & PE placement, which apparently *everyone* wanted. To the point that the mission leader sent out a NASA-wide email asking whether we thought we’d get double pay and free beer.”

“Did you?”

I laugh at the look he gives me. He is just so hilariously, deliciously *teasable*. “Why did everyone want to be part of that team, anyway?”

He shrugs. “I’m not sure why everyone else did. I assume because it’s challenging. Lots of high-risk, high-reward projects. But for me it was . . .” He glances out of the window, at a maple tree in the JPL campus. Actually, no: I think he might be looking up. At the sky. “It just felt like . . .” He trails off, as though not sure how to continue.

“Like it was as close as possible to actually being on Mars? With the rover?” I ask him.

His eyes return to me. “Yeah.” He seems surprised. Like I managed to put something elusive into words. “Yeah, that’s exactly it.”

I nod, because I get it. The idea of helping build something that will explore Mars, the idea of being able to control where it goes and what it does . . . that does it for me, too.

Ian and I study each other for a few seconds in silence, both of us smiling faintly. Long enough for the idea that’s been bouncing in my head to solidify once and for all.

Yeah. I’m gonna go for it. *Sorry, Mara. I like your cousin-or-something a little too much to pass this up.*

“Okay, I do have a career question for you. To save our informational interview appearances.”

“Shoot.”

“So, I graduate with my Ph.D. Which should take me about four more years.”

“That’s a while,” he says, his tone a bit unreadable.

Yes, it feels like forever. “Not *that* long. So, I graduate, and I decide that I want to work at NASA and not for some weirdo billionaire who treats space exploration like it’s his own homemade penis-enlargement remedy.”

Ian’s nod is pained. “Wise.”

“What would make me look like a strong candidate? What does a great application package look like?”

He mulls it over. “I’m not sure. For my team, I would usually hire internally. But I’m almost certain I still have my application materials on my old laptop. I could send them to you.”

Okay. Perfect. Great.

The opening I was waiting for.

My heart rate picks up. Warmth twists in my lower stomach. I lean forward with a smile, feeling like I’m finally in my element. This, *this*, is what I know best. Depending on how busy I am with school, or work, or binge-watching K-dramas, I do this about once a week. Which amounts to quite a bit of practice. “Maybe I could come to your place?” I say, finding the sweet spot between comically suggestive and *Let’s get together to play Cards Against Humanity*. “And you could show me?”

“I meant—in Houston. My laptop’s in Houston.”

“So you *didn’t* bring your 2010 laptop to Pasadena?”

He smiles. “Knew I’d forgotten something.”

“Sure did.” I meet his eyes squarely. Lean half an inch closer. “Then maybe I can still come to your place, and we could do something else?”

He gives me a half-puzzled look. “Do what?”

I press my lips together. *Okay. Maybe I overestimated my flirting skills. Have I, though? I don’t think so.* “Really?” I ask, amused. “Am I *that* bad?”

“I’m sorry, I don’t follow.” Ian’s expression is all arrested confusion, like I just suddenly started talking in an Australian accent. “Bad at what?”

“At hitting on you, Ian.”

I can pinpoint the precise, exact moment the meaning of my words sinks into the language part of his brain. He blinks a few times. Then his big body goes still in a tight, impossible, *vibrating* way, like his internal software is buffering through an unpredictable set of updates.

He looks absolutely, almost *charmingly* mystified, and something occurs to me: I’ve struck up flirtatious conversations with dozens of guys and girls at parties, bars, laundromats, gyms, bookstores, seminars, muddy obstacle races, greenhouses—even, on one

memorable occasion, in the waiting room of a Planned Parenthood, and . . . *no one* has ever been this clueless. No one. So maybe he was just *pretending* not to get it. Maybe he was hoping I'd back off.

Shit.

"I'm sorry." I straighten and roll my chair back, giving him a few inches of space. "I'm making you uncomfortable."

"No. No, I—" He's finally rebooting. Shaking his head. "No, you aren't, I'm just—"

"A bit freaked out?" I smile reassuringly, trying to signal that it's okay. I can take a no. I'm a big girl. "It's fine. Let's forget I said anything. But do email me your application package once you're back home, please. I promise I won't reply with unsolicited nudes."

"No, it's not that . . ." He closes his eyes and pinches the bridge of his nose. His cheekbones look rosier than before. His lips move, trying to form words for a few seconds, until he settles on: "It's just . . . unexpected."

Oh. I tilt my head. "Why?" I thought I'd been laying it on pretty thick.

"Because." His large hand gestures in my direction. He swallows, and I watch his throat work. "Just . . . look at you."

I actually do it. I look down at myself, taking in my crossed legs, my khaki shorts, my plain black tee. My body is in its usual condition: tall. Wiry. A bit scrawny. Olive-skinned. I even shaved this morning. Maybe. I can't remember. Point is, I look okay.

So I say it—"I look okay"—which should sound confident but comes out a bit petulant. It's not that I think I'm hot shit, but I refuse to be insecure about my appearance. I like myself. Historically, the people I've wanted to sleep with have liked me, too. My body does its job as a means to an end. It manages to let me kayak around California lakes without muscle aches the following day, and it digests lactose like it's an Olympic discipline. That's all that matters.

But his reply is: "You don't look okay," and . . . no.

"Really." My tone is icy. Is Ian Floyd trying to imply that he's out of my reach? Because if so, I *will* slap him. "How do I look, then?"

"Just . . ." He swallows again. "I . . . Women like you don't usually . . ."

“Women *like me*.” Wow. Sounds like I’ll actually have to slap him. “What’s that? Because—”

“Beautiful. You are very, *very* beautiful. Probably the most . . . And you’re obviously smart and funny, so . . .” He gives me a helpless look, suddenly looking less like a genius NASA team leader built like a cedar tree and more . . . boyish. Young. “Is this some kind of joke?”

I study him through squinting eyes, revising my earlier assessment. Perhaps my conclusions were premature, and it’s not quite correct that no one can be this clueless. Perhaps *someone* can.

Ian, for instance. Ian, who could probably make good money as a stock-photo model, tags: Hot Guy, Ginger, Massive. I saw about four people check him out on our way here, but he apparently has no idea that he could be fancast to play the hot Weasley brother. Absolutely zero awareness of how glorious he is.

I grin, suddenly charmed. “Can I ask you a question?” I roll myself closer, and I’m not sure when that happened, but he angled his chair so that my knees end up slotted between his. Nice. “It’s a bit forward.”

He looks down at our touching legs and nods. As usual, only once.

“Can I kiss you? Like, right now?”

“I . . .” He stares. Then blinks. Then mouths something that’s not a word.

My grin widens. “That’s not no, is it?”

“No.” He shakes his head. His eyes are fixed on my lips, the black of his pupils swallowing the blue. “It’s not.”

“Okay, then.”

It’s pretty simple, standing from my chair and leaning forward on his. My palms find the armrests and press against them, and for a long moment I stay right there, caging this bear-size man who could flick me away with his little finger but doesn’t. Instead he looks up at me like I’m wondrous and beautiful and awe-inspiring, like I’m a gift, like he’s a bit dumbstruck.

Like he *really* wants me to kiss him. So I close that last inch and I do. And it’s . . .

Kind of awkward, to be honest. Not bad. Just a little hesitant. His lips part in a gasp when they touch mine, and for a split second, a terrifying thought occurs to me.

It's his first kiss. Is it? Oh my God, it's his first kiss. Am I really giving someone their first—

Ian angles his head, pushes his mouth against mine, and it destroys my train of thought. I'm not sure how he manages, but whatever he's doing with his lips and teeth feels massively, aggressively right. I whimper when his tongue meets mine. He growls in response, something rumbly and deep in his throat.

Okay. This is no first kiss. This is a fucking *masterpiece*.

He's probably two hundred pounds of muscles and I have no clue whether the chair can hold us both, but I decide to live dangerously: I straddle Ian's lap, feeling his sharp inhale vibrate through my body. For a suspended second our lips part and his eyes hold mine, like we're both waiting for every piece of furniture in the room to collapse. But JPL must be investing in sturdy decor.

"*That* was high-risk, high-reward," I say, and I'm surprised at how short my breath is already. The room is silent, bathed in warm light. I let out a single, shaky laugh, and I realize where Ian's hand is: hovering half an inch above my waist. Warm. Eager. Ready to snap.

"Can I—?" he asks.

"Yes." I laugh into his mouth. "You *can* touch me. It's the whole point of—"

I don't get to finish, because the second he has permission his hands are everywhere, one on my nape, pulling my lips into his, the other on the small of my back. The moment my chest presses against his, he does another of those low, rough sounds—but ten times deeper, like it comes from his very core. He's all scratchy stubble, warm unwieldy flesh, and in the corner of my eyes I see only red, red, *so much red*.

"I'm *in love* with your freckles," I say, right before nipping at one on his jaw. "I thought about licking them the moment I saw you." I make my way to the hollow of his ear. He exhales, sharp.

"When I saw you, I—" I suck on the skin of his throat, and he stutters. "I thought you were a little too beautiful," he finishes,

breathless. His hands are traveling under my shirt, up my spine, cautiously tracing the edges of my bra. He smells magnificent, clean and serious and warm.

"Too beautiful for what?"

"For everything. Too beautiful to look at, even." His grip on my waist tightens. "Hannah, you—"

I am grinding my groin against his. Which is probably the reason we both sound like we're running a marathon. And in my defense, I really only meant for this to be a kiss, but yeah. No. I'm not stopping, and judging from the way his fingers dip into the back of my shorts to cup my ass cheek and press me tighter into his hard cock, he's not planning to, either.

"Does anyone else use this office?" I ask. I'm not shy, but this is . . . good. No-interruptions-please good. I-don't-want-to-wait-till-we-get-home good. I'm-going-to-come-in-about-two-minutes good.

He shakes his head, and I could cry of happiness, but I don't have time. It's like we were playing before, and now we're in earnest. We're barely kissing, uncoordinated, unfocused, just grinding against each other, and I chase the feeling of his body against mine, the high of being so close, his erection between my legs as we both make hushed, grunting, obscene noises, as we both try to get closer, to get more contact, skin, heat, friction, friction, friction, I need *more friction* —

"*Shit*." I cannot get *enough*. It's not a good position, and I hate this stupid chair, and this is driving me *insane*. I let out a loud, infuriated groan and sink my teeth deep into his neck, like I am made of heat and frustration, and—

Somehow, Ian knows exactly what I need. Because he stands from the cursed chair with a muted, "It's okay, it's okay, I've got you." He takes me right with him and does something that could technically qualify as destroying NASA property to make enough room for us. A moment later I'm sitting on the desk, and all of a sudden we can both move like we want to. He opens my legs with his palms and slots his own right between them, and—

Finally. The friction is—this is precisely what I asked for, precisely what I *needed*—

“Yes,” I breathe out.

“Yeah?” I don’t even need to move my hips. His hand slides down to grip my ass, and he somehow knows exactly how to angle me, how the hem of my shorts can brush against my clit. “Like this?” I feel his cock iron-hard on my hip and I make mewling, embarrassing, pleading sounds into the hollow of his throat, murmuring incomprehensibly about how good this is, how grateful I am, how I’m going to do the same for him when we finally fuck, how I’m going to do *whatever he wants*—

“Stop,” he pants into my mouth, urgent, a little desperate. “You need to be quiet, or I’m going to—I just want to—”

I laugh against his cheek, reedy, hushed. My thighs are starting to shake. There is a liquid, pressing heat swelling in my abdomen. “Want to—*ah*—want to what?”

“I just want to make you come.”

It sends me right over the edge. Into something that’s nothing like my usual, run-of-the-mill orgasm. Those tend to start like small fractures and then slowly, gradually deepen into something lovely and relaxing. Those are fun, good fun, but this . . . This pleasure is sudden and violent. It splinters into me like a wonderful, terrible explosion, new and frightening and fantastic, and it goes on and on, as though every heart-stopping, delicious second of it is being squeezed out of me. I screw my eyes shut, clutch Ian’s shoulders, and whimper into his throat, listening to the hushed “Fuck. *Fuck*,” he mouths into my collarbone. I was so sure I knew what my body was capable of, but this feels somewhere well beyond it.

And somehow, on top of knowing exactly how to get me there, Ian also knows when to stop. The very moment it all becomes unbearable, his arms tighten around me, and his thigh becomes a solid, still weight between mine. I twine my arms around his neck, hide my face in his throat, and wait for my body to recover.

“Well,” I say. My voice is raspier than I ever remember hearing it. There’s a wireless keyboard on the floor, cables dangling by my thigh, and if I move even half an inch back, I’ll destroy one, maybe two monitors. “Well,” I repeat. I let out a peal of winded laughter against his skin.

“You okay?” he asks, pulling back to meet my eyes. His hands are trembling slightly against my back. Because, I assume, I came. And he didn’t. Which is very unfair. I just had a life-defining orgasm and can’t really remember my own name, but even in this state I can grasp the injustice of it all.

“I’m . . . great.” I laugh again. “You?”

He smiles. “I’m pretty great, to be—” I drag my hand down between us, palm flush against the front of his jeans, and his mouth snaps shut.

Okay. So he has a big cock. To exactly no one’s surprise. This man is going to be fantastic in bed. Phenomenal. The best sex I’ve ever had with a dude. And I’ve had *a lot*.

“What do you want?” I ask. His eyes are dark, unseeing. I cup my hand around the outline of his erection, rub the heel of my palm against the length, arch up to whisper in the curve of his ear, “Can I go down on you?”

The noise Ian makes is rough and guttural, and it takes me about three seconds to realize that he’s already coming, groaning into my skin, trapping my hand between our bodies. I feel him shudder, and this big man coming apart against me, utterly lost and helpless in front of his own pleasure, is by far the most erotic experience of my entire life.

I want to get him into a bed. I want hours, *days* with him. I want to make him feel the way he’s feeling right now, but a hundredfold stronger, a hundred million more times.

“I’m sorry,” he slurs.

“What?” I lean back to look at his face. “Why?”

“That was . . . pitiful.” He pulls me back to bury his face in my throat. It’s followed by a lick, and a bite, and oh my God, the sex is going to be off the charts. Earth-shattering.

“It was amazing. Let’s do it again. Let’s go to my place. Or let’s just lock the door.”

He laughs and kisses me, different from before, deep but gentle and meandering, and . . . it’s not really, in my experience, the type of kiss people share *after* sex. In my experience, after sex people wash up, put their clothes back on, then wave good-bye and go to the

nearest Starbucks to get a cake pop. But this is nice, because Ian is an excellent kisser, and he *smells* good, he *tastes* good, he *feels* good, and—

"Can I buy you dinner?" he asks against my lips. "Before we . . ."

I shake my head. The tips of our noses brush against each other. "No need."

"I . . . I'd like to, Hannah."

"Nah." I kiss him again. Once. Deep. Glorious. "I don't do that."

"You don't do"—another kiss—"what?"

"Dinner." Kiss. Again. "Well," I amend, "I do eat. But I don't do dinner dates."

Ian pulls back, his expression curious. "Why no dinner dates?"

"I just . . ." I shrug, wishing we were still kissing. "I don't date, in general."

"You don't date . . . at all?"

"Nope." His expression is suddenly withdrawn again, so I smile and add, "But I'm very happy to come to your place anyway. No need to be dating for that, right?"

He takes a step back—a large one, like he wants to put some physical space between us. The front of his jeans is . . . a mess. I want to clean him up. "Why . . . why don't you date?"

"Really?" I laugh. "You want to hear about my socio-emotional trauma after we did"—I gesture between us—"*this*?"

He nods, serious and a little stiff, and I sober up.

Seriously? He really wants that? He wants me to explain to him that I don't really have the time or the emotional availability for any kind of romantic entanglement? That I can't really imagine anyone sticking around for something that's not sex once they really get to know me? That I've long since realized that the longer people are with me, the more likely they are to find out that I'm not as smart as they think, as pretty, as funny? Honestly, I *know* that my best bet is to keep people at arm's length, so that they never find out what I'm actually like. Which is, incidentally: a bit of a bitch. I'm just not good at *caring* about . . . anything, really. It took me about one and a half decades to find something I was truly passionate about. This

friendship experiment I'm doing with Mara and Sadie is still very much that, an experiment, and . . .

Oh God. Does Ian want to *date*? He doesn't even *live* here. "So you're saying . . ." I scratch my temples, coming down fast from my post-orgasm high. "You're saying you're not interested in having sex?"

He closes his eyes in something that *really* doesn't look like a no. *Definitely* doesn't look like a lack of interest. But what he says is, "I like you."

I laugh. "I noticed."

"It's . . . uncommon. For me. To like someone this much."

"I like you, too." I shrug. "Shouldn't we hang out, then? Isn't that good enough?"

He looks away. Down, to his shoes. "If I spend more time with you, I'm only going to like you more."

"Nah." I snort. "That's not the way it usually works."

"It does. It will, for me." He sounds so solidly, irrefutably sure, I cannot do anything but stare at him. His lips are bee-stung, and everything about him is beautiful, and he looks so quietly, stoically devastated at the idea of fucking me with no strings attached that I should probably find this comical, but the truth is that I can't remember ever being this attracted to someone else, and my body is *vibrating* for his, and . . .

Maybe you could go out with him. Just this once. An exception. Maybe you could try it out. Maybe it could work. Maybe you two will —

What? No. *No*. What the fuck? Just the fact that I'm contemplating it scares the shit out of me. No. I don't—I'm not like that. These things are a waste of time and energy. I'm busy. I'm not cut out for this stuff.

"I'm sorry," I force myself to say. It's not even a lie. I'm pretty fucking sorry right now. "I don't think it's a good idea."

"Okay," he says after a long moment. Accepting. A bit sad. "Okay. If . . . if you change your mind. About dinner, that is. Let me know."

"Okay." I nod. "When are you leaving? What's my deadline?" I add, attempting some lightheartedness.

“It doesn’t matter. I can . . . I travel here a lot, and . . .” He shakes his head. “You can change your mind whenever. No deadline.”

Oh. “Well, if *you* change your mind about fucking . . .”

He exhales a laugh, which sounds a little like a pained groan, and for a moment I feel the compulsion to explain myself. I want to tell him, *It’s not you. It’s me*. But I know how that would sound, and I know better than to put the words out there. So we regard each other for a few seconds, and then . . . then there’s nothing left to say, is there? My body goes through the motions automatically. I slide off the desk, take a moment to straighten the monitors behind me, the mouse, the keyboards, the cable, and when I walk past Ian through the door he follows me with his solemn, sad eyes, running his palm over his jaw.

The last words I hear from him are, “It was really good to meet you, Hannah.” I think I should say it back, but there’s an unfamiliar weight in my chest, and I can’t quite bring myself to do it. So I make do with a small smile and a halfhearted wave. I stuff my hands in my pockets while my body is still thrumming with what I left behind, and wander slowly back to the Caltech campus, thinking about red hair and missed opportunities.

That night, when I get an email from IanFloyd@nasa.gov, my heart stumbles all over itself. But it’s just an empty email, no text, not even an automatic signature. Just an attachment with his NASA application from a few years ago, together with a handful of other people’s. More recent ones that he must have gotten from his friends and colleagues, a few more examples to send me.

Well.

He’ll make for a great boyfriend, I tell myself, leaning back in my bed and staring up at the ceiling. There is a weird green thing in one corner that I suspect might be mold. Mara keeps telling me I should just move out of this shithole and find a place with her and Sadie, but I don’t know. Seems like we’d get *too* close. A big commitment. It might get messy. *He’ll make for a great boyfriend. For someone who deserves to have one.*

The following day, when Mara asks me about my meeting with her cousin-or-something, I say only “Uneventful,” and I don’t even

know why. I don't like lying, and I like lying to someone who's rapidly becoming a friend even less, but I can't make myself say any more than that. Two weeks later, I turn in a reflection paper as part of my Water Resources class requirements.

> *I must admit, Dr. Harding, that I initially thought this assignment would be a total waste of time. I've known I wanted to end up at NASA for years, and I've known that I wanted to work with robotics and space exploration for just as long. However, after meeting with Ian Floyd, I have realized that I'd love to work, specifically, on Attitude and Position Estimation of Mars rovers. In conclusion: not a waste of time, or at least not a total one.*

I get an A- for the class. And in the following years, I don't let myself think about Ian too much. But whenever I rewatch video recordings of mission control celebrating *Curiosity*'s landing, I cannot help but look for the tall, red-haired man in the back of the room. And whenever I find him, I feel the ghost of something squeeze tight inside my chest.

Chapter 3

Svalbard Islands, Norway
Present

“They said they couldn’t send first responders!”

My breath, dry and white, fogs the black shell of my satellite phone. Because Svalbard in February is well into the negative Celsius. Disturbingly close to the negative Fahrenheit, too, and this morning is no exception.

“They said it was too dangerous,” I continue, “that the winds are too extreme.” As if to prove my point, a half-hissing, half-howling sound weaves through what I’ve begun to think of as *my crevasse*.

And as far as crevasses go, it’s a good one to get stuck in. Relatively shallow. The western wall is nicely angled, just enough to allow the sunlight to filter in, which is probably the only reason I have yet to freeze to death or get horrible frostbite. The downside, though, is that at this time of the year there are only about five hours of light per day. And they’re just about to run out.

“Avalanche danger is set at the highest level, and it’s not safe for anyone to come out to get me,” I add, speaking right into the satphone’s mic. Repeating what Dr. Merel, my team leader, told me a few hours ago, during my last communication with AMASE, NASA’s home base here in Norway. It was right before he reminded me that I’d been the one to choose this. That I’d known what the risks of my mission were, and I still decided to undertake it. That the path to space exploration is full of pain and self-sacrifice. That it was my fault for falling in an icy hole in the ground and spraining my fucking ankle.

Well, he did not say that. *Fucking*, or *fault*. He did, however, make sure that I was aware that no one would be able to come help me until tomorrow, and that I needed to be strong. Even though, of course, we both knew what the results of a match between me and an overnight snowstorm would be.

Storm: 100. Hannah Arroyo: dead.

“The weather’s not that bad.” A wave of static almost drains the voice on the other side of the line.

Ian Floyd’s voice.

Because, for some reason, he’s here. Coming. For me.

“It’s a—it’s a storm, Ian. Are you—please, tell me you’re not just strolling outdoors when the worst storm of the year is just hours from starting.”

“I’m not.” A pause. “It’s more of a brisk walk.”

I close my eyes. “In a *storm*. A blizzard. Winds of at least thirty-five miles per hour. Heavy snowfall and no visibility.”

“You might be wasted in engineering.”

“What?”

“You’re really good at meteorology stuff.”

I cannot feel my legs; my teeth are chattering; every time I breathe, my skin feels like it’s been chewed on by a horde of piranhas. And yet, I find the strength to roll my eyes. At least the cranky bitch inside my heart is holding strong. “You’d love it, wouldn’t you? If I were busy giving the weather on local news instead of at NASA with you.”

The winds are blowing holes through my eardrums. I honestly have no idea how I can hear a smile in his “Nah.”

He’s insane. He cannot be here in Norway. He isn’t even supposed to be in Europe. “Did AMASE change their mind on sending help?” I ask. “Have the storm forecasts changed?”

“They haven’t.” Whenever the static dips, I hear a low, oddly familiar noise through the satphone. Ian’s breathing, I suspect, heavy and loud and faster than normal. Like he’s grunting his way through hazardous ground. “You’re approximately thirty minutes from my current location. Once I get to you, we’ll have a sixty-minute trek to

safety. Which means that we should be able to just barely avoid the storm."

The second he says the word *trek*, my stupid brain decides to attempt to rotate my ankle. Which leads to me biting my chapped, frozen lips to swallow a whimper. A *terrible* idea, as it turns out. "Ian, nothing of what you just said makes sense."

"Really?" He sounds amused. How? *Why?* "Nothing?"

"How do you even know where I am?"

"GPS tracker. On your Iridium phone."

"It's impossible. AMASE said they couldn't activate the tracker. The sensors aren't working."

"AMASE isn't within range, and the coming storm was probably interfering." A strong gust of wind lifts, and for a painfully gelid moment it's everywhere: whooshing around me, piercing inside my lungs, making its way into my ears. I try to curl my body away, but it does nothing to stop the freezing air. I dig myself only deeper into the snow and jostle my stupid ankle.

Fuck.

"AMASE is over three hours from my creva—location. If you really *do* get here in thirty minutes, we're not going to make it there in time to avoid the storm. *You* are not going to make it back in time, and I'm not going to let something terrible happen to you just because I—"

"I'm not coming from AMASE," he says. "And that's not where we're going."

"But how did you even access my GPS tracker if you're not at AMASE?"

A pause. "I'm good with computers."

"You're— Are you saying you *hacked* your way into—"

"They mentioned you're injured. How bad is it?"

I glance at my boots. Ice crystals have begun to crust around the soles. "Just a few scrapes. And a sprain. I think I could *maybe* walk, but—I don't know about sixty minutes." I don't know about sixty seconds. "And on this terrain—"

"You won't have to walk at all."

I frown, even though my brow is almost frozen. "How will I get to wherever we're going if—"

“Do you have ascenders?”

“Yes. But again, I don’t know if I can climb . . .”

“No problem. I’ll just haul you out.”

“You . . . It’s too dangerous. The terrain around the edge might collapse and you’d fall in, too.” I let out a choppy breath. “Ian, I *cannot* let you.”

“Don’t worry, I’m not in the habit of falling inside crevasses.”

“Neither am I.”

“You sure about that?”

Okay. Fine. I walked right into this one. “Ian, I cannot let you do this. If it’s . . .” I take a shuddering, frigid breath. “If it’s because you feel responsible for this. If you’re risking your life because you think it’s somehow your fault I ended up here, then you really shouldn’t. You know that I have no one to blame but me, and—”

“I am about to start climbing,” he interrupts distractedly, like I wasn’t in the dead middle of an impassioned speech.

“Climbing? What are you climbing?”

“I’ll put away my phone, but get in touch if anything happens.”

“Ian, I *really* don’t think you should—”

“Hannah.”

The shock of hearing my name—in Ian’s voice, cocooned by the whistle of the wind, and through the metallic line of my satphone, no less—has me instantly shutting up. Until he continues.

“Just relax and think of Mars, okay? I’ll be there soon.”

Chapter 4

Johnson Space Center, Houston, Texas
One year ago

It's not that I'm shocked to see him.

That would be, honestly, pretty idiotic. Too idiotic even for me: a well-known occasional idiot. I might not have seen Ian Floyd in over four years—yup, since the day I had the best sex-and-it-wasn't-even-really-sex-God-what-a-waste-of-my-life and then barely forced myself to wave good-bye at him while the mahogany of his office door closed in my face. It might have been a while, but I've kept up with his whereabouts through the use of highly sophisticated technology and cutting-edge research tools.

I.e., Google.

As it turns out, when you're one of NASA's top engineers, people write shit about you. I swear I don't look up "Ian + Floyd" twice a week or anything like that, but I do get curious every once in a while, and the Internet offers so much information in exchange for so little effort. That's how I found out that when the former chief resigned for health reasons, Ian was chosen as head of engineering for *Tenacity*, the rover that landed safely in the de Vaucouleurs Crater just last year. He even gave *60 Minutes* an interview, in which he mostly came across as serious, competent, handsome, humble, reserved.

For some reason, it made me think of the way he'd groaned into my skin. His viselike grip on my hips, his thigh moving between my legs. It made me remember that he'd wanted to take me to dinner, and that I'd actually—appallingly, unfathomably—been tempted to say yes. I watched the entire thing on YouTube. Then I scrolled down to read the comments and realized that a good two thirds were from

users who'd noticed exactly how serious, competent, handsome, humble, reserved, and likely well-endowed Ian was. I hastened to click out, feeling caught with my entire torso in the cookie jar.

Whatever.

I think I expected my Google search to lead to more personal stuff, too. Maybe a Facebook account with pictures of adorable ginger toddlers. Or one of those wedding websites with overproduced pictures and the story of how the couple met. But no. The closest was a triathlon he did about two years ago near Houston. He didn't place particularly well, but he did finish it. As far as Google is concerned, that's the only non-work-related activity Ian has partaken in during the last four years.

But that's really beside the point, which is: I know quite a bit about Ian Floyd's career accomplishments, and I am well aware that he's still at NASA. Therefore, it makes no sense for me to be shocked to see him. And I'm not. I'm really not.

It's just that with over three thousand people working at the Johnson Space Center, I figured I'd run into him around my third week on the job. Maybe even during my third month. I definitely did *not* expect to see him on my first day, in the middle of the freaking new-employee orientation. And I definitely didn't anticipate that he'd spot me immediately and stare for a long, long time, as though remembering exactly who I am, as though not wondering why I look familiar or struggling to place me.

Which . . . he isn't. He clearly isn't. Ian appears at the entrance of the conference room where the new hires have been parked to wait for the next speaker; with a slightly aggravated expression he looks around for someone, notices *me*, chatting with Alexis, about a millisecond after I notice *him*.

He pauses for a moment, wide-eyed. Then weaves through the clusters of people chatting around the table, marching toward me with long strides. His eyes stay fixed on mine and he looks confident and pleasantly surprised, like a guy picking up his girlfriend at the airport after she spent four months abroad studying the courtship habits of the humpback whale. But it has nothing to do with me. It's not because of me.

It *cannot* be because of me, right?

But Ian stops just a couple of feet away from Alexis, studies me with a small smile for a couple of seconds longer than is customary, and then says: “Hannah.”

That’s it. That’s all he says. My name. And I *really* didn’t want to see him. I *really* figured it would be weird to be with him again, after our not-quite-orgasmless first and only meeting. But . . .

It’s not. Not at all. It just feels natural, nearly irresistible to smile at him, push away from the table and up on my toes for a hug, fill my nostrils with his clean scent, and say against his shoulder, “Hey, you.”

His hands press briefly into my spine, and we fit together just like four years ago. Then, a second later, we both pull back. I don’t do blushing, not ever, but my heart is beating fast and there’s a curious heat creeping up my chest.

Maybe it’s because this *should* be weird. Right? Four years ago, I came on to him. Then I came *on* him. Then I turned him down when he asked me to spend orgasmless, space-explorationless time with him. That’s what I wanted to avoid: the male, awkward, ego-wounded reaction I was sure Ian would have.

But now he’s here, disarmingly pleased to see me, and I just feel happy to be in his presence, like I did back when we coded our afternoon away. He looks a bit older; the day-old stubble is about one week old now, and maybe he’s gotten even bigger. For the rest, though, he’s just *himself*. Hair is red, eyes are blue, freckles are everywhere. I’m being forcibly reminded of his uniform initialization in C++—and of his teeth on my skin.

“You made it,” he says, like I really did just get off a jet plane. “You’re here.”

He’s smiling. I smile, too, and furrow my brow. “What? You didn’t think I’d actually graduate?”

“Wasn’t sure you’d ever pass your Water Resources class.”

I burst out laughing. “What? Just because you saw me, with your own eyes, put zero effort into my assignment?”

“That *did* play a role, yeah.”

“You should read the stuff I BS’d about you in that report.”

“Ah, yes. What STDs did I have to battle to get to where I am today?”

“What STDs did you *not*?”

He sighs. A throat clears and we both turn— Oh, right. Alexis is *also* here. Looking between us, for some reason with saucer eyes.

“Oh, Ian, this is Alexis. She’s starting today, too. Alexis, this is—”

“Ian Floyd,” she says, sounding vaguely breathless. “I’m a fan.”

Ian seems vaguely alarmed, as though the idea of having “fans” befuddles him. Alexis doesn’t seem to notice and asks me, “You two know each other?”

“Ah . . . yeah, we do. We had a . . .” I gesture vaguely. “A thing. Years ago.”

“A *thing*?” Alexis’s eyes widen even more.

“Oh no, I didn’t mean *that* kind of thing. We did some kind of—one of those—what are they called . . . ?”

“An informational interview,” Ian patiently provides.

“An informational interview?” Alexis sounds skeptical. She stares at Ian, who is still staring at me.

“Yeah. Kind of. It devolved into a . . .” *Into what? Us almost fucking on NASA property? You wish, Hannah.*

“A debugging session,” Ian says. Then clears his throat.

I let out a laugh. “Right. That.”

“Debugging session?” Alexis sounds even *more* skeptical. “That doesn’t sound fun.”

“Oh, it was,” Ian says. He’s still staring at me. Like he’s found his long-missing house keys and is afraid he’ll lose them again if he looks away.

“Yeah.” I cannot help making my smile just a tad suggestive. An experiment. I seem to do lots of those when he’s around. “Lots of fun.”

“Right.” Ian finally looks away, smiling the same way. “Lots.”

“How did you guys meet?” Alexis asks, more suspicious by the second.

“Oh, my best friend is Ian’s cousin-or-something.”

Ian nods. “How is . . .” He briefly stumbles on the name. “I want to say Melissa?”

“Mara. Your cousin’s name is *Mara*. Keep up, will you?” I fail to sound stern. “Have you not talked to her since she put us in touch?”

“I don’t believe we talked back then, either. Everything happened through—”

“—Great-Aunt Delphina, right. How’s the Home Depot video?”

“Lowe’s. I hear it’s making a resurgence since Uncle Mitch started hosting Thanksgiving.”

I laugh. “Well, Mara is great. She also graduated with her Ph.D. and recently moved to D.C. to work for the EPA. No interest in space stuff. Just, you know . . . saving the Earth.”

“Oh.” He doesn’t seem too impressed. “It’s a good fight.”

“But you’re glad someone else is shouldering it while you and I spend our days launching cool gadgets into space?”

He chuckles. “More or less.”

“Okay, this is very . . .” Alexis, again. We both turn to her: her eyes are narrow, and she sounds shrill. Honestly, I keep forgetting she’s here. “I’ve never seen two people . . .” She gestures between us. “You guys are *clearly* . . .” Ian and I exchange a baffled glance. “I’m going to leave you to it,” she says inscrutably. Then she turns on her heel, and Ian and I are alone.

Kind of. We’re in a room full of people, but . . . alone.

“Well . . . hi,” I say.

“Hey.” The pitch is lower. More intimate.

“I kind of expected this would be unpleasant.”

“This?”

“This.” I point back and forth between us. “Seeing you again. After the way we left off.”

He cocks his head. “Why?”

“Just . . .” I’m not sure how to articulate it, that my experience is that men who have been rejected by women can often be scary in a million different ways. It doesn’t matter anyway. It sounds like he put what happened between us behind him the second I stepped out of his office. “Doesn’t matter. Since it’s not. Unpleasant, that is.”

Ian nods once. Like I remember from years ago. “What team have you been assigned to?”

“A & PE.”

“You don’t say.” He sounds pleased. Which is . . . new, mostly. My parents reacted to the news that I was hired by NASA in their usual way: showing disappointment that I did not go into medicine like my siblings. Sadie and Mara were always supportive and happy for me when I got my dream job, but they don’t care enough about space exploration to fully grasp the significance of where I ended up. Ian, though, Ian knows. And even though he’s now a big shot, and A & PE is not his team anymore, it still makes me feel warm and tingly.

“Yeah—this random guy I once met told me it was the best team.”

“Wise words.”

“But I’m not going to start with the team right away, because . . . I’ve managed to get them to pick me for AMASE.”

His smile is so unabashedly, genuinely happy for me, my heart leaps in my throat. “AMASE.”

“Yup.”

“Hannah, that’s fantastic.”

It is. AMASE is the shit, and the selection process to take part in an expedition was brutal, to the point that I’m not quite sure how I made it in. Probably sheer luck: Dr. Merel, one of the expedition leaders, was looking for someone with experience in gas chromatograph-mass spectrometry. Which I happen to have, due to some side projects my Ph.D. advisor foisted upon me. At the time, I aggressively bitched and moaned my way through them. In hindsight, I feel a bit guilty.

“Have you been there?” I ask Ian, even though I already know the answer, because he mentioned AMASE when we met. Plus, I’ve seen his CV, and some pictures from past expeditions. In one, taken over the summer of 2019, he’s wearing a dark thermal shirt and kneeling in front of a rover, squinting at its robotic arm. There is a young, pretty woman standing right behind him, elbows propped on his shoulders, smiling in the direction of the camera.

I’ve thought about that picture more than just a couple of times. Imagined Ian asking the woman for dinner. Wondered if, unlike me, she was able to say yes.

“I’ve been there twice, winter and summer. Both great. Winter was considerably more miserable, but—” He stops. “Wait, isn’t the next

expedition leaving . . .”

“In three days. For five months.” I watch him nod and digest the information. He still looks happy for me, but it’s a little . . . subdued. A split second of disappointment, maybe? “What?” I ask.

“Nothing.” He shakes his head. “It would have been nice to catch up.”

“We still can,” I say, maybe a bit too fast. “I’m not leaving till Thursday. Want to go out and—”

“Not get dinner, surely?” His smile is teasing. “I remember you don’t . . . eat with other people.”

“Right.” The truth is that things have changed. Not that now I go out for dates—I very much still don’t. And not that I’ve magically become an emotionally available person—I’m still very much *not*. But somewhere in the last couple of years, the whole Tinder game got . . . first a bit old; then a bit tiresome; then, eventually, a bit lonely. These days, I either focus on work or on Mara and Sadie. “I do drink coffee, though,” I say on impulse. Even though I find coffee disgusting.

“Iced tea,” Ian says, somehow remembering my four-year-old order. “I can’t, though.”

My heart sinks. “You can’t?” Is he seeing someone? Not interested? “It doesn’t have to—” *be a date*, I hasten to say, but we’re interrupted.

“Ian, you’re here.” The HR rep who’s been showing the new hires around appears at his side. “Thank you for making time— I know you need to be at JPL by tonight. Everyone.” She claps her hands. “Please, take a seat. Ian Floyd, the current chief of engineering on the Mars Exploration Program, is going to tell you about some of NASA’s ongoing projects.”

Oh. *Oh.*

Ian and I exchange one long glance. For just a moment, he looks like he wants to tell me one last thing. But the HR rep leads him to the head of the conference table, and there’s either not enough time or it’s not something that’s important enough to be said.

Half a minute later, I sit and listen to his clear, calm voice as he talks about the many projects he’s overseeing, heart tight and heavy

in my chest for reasons I cannot figure out.

Twenty minutes later, I lock eyes with him for the last time just as someone knocks to remind him that his plane will board in less than two hours.

And a little over six months later, when I finally meet him again, I hate him.

I hate him, I hate him, I hate him, and I don’t hesitate to let him know.

Chapter 5

Svalbard Islands, Norway
Present

The next time my satphone vibrates, the winds have picked up even more. It's snowing, too. I've somehow managed to nestle myself in a small nook in the wall of my crevasse, but large flurries are starting to happily stick to the mini-rover I brought with me.

Which is, I must admit, ironic in a cosmic kind of way. The very reason I ventured out here was to test how the mini-rover I designed would work in highly stressful, low-sunlight, low-command-input situations. Of course, it was not supposed to storm. I was going to drop off the gear and then immediately return to the headquarters, which . . . well. It didn't quite work out like that, obviously.

But the gear *is* being covered by a layer of snow. And the sun *is* going to set soon. The mini-rover *is* in a highly stressful, low-sunlight, low-command-input situation, and from a scientific standpoint, this mission wasn't a total clusterfuck. At some point in the next few days, someone at AMASE (likely Dr. Merel, that *asshole*) will try to activate it, and then we'll know whether my work was actually solid. Well, *they* will know. By then, I'll probably just be a Popsicle with a very pissed-off expression, like Jack Torrance at the end of *The Shining*.

"Are you still doing okay?"

Ian's voice jostles me from my preapocalyptic whining. My heart flutters like a hummingbird—a sickly, freezing one who forgot to migrate south with her buddies. I don't bother answering, instead instantly ask: "Why are you here?" I know I sound like an ungrateful bitch, and while I've never concerned myself with coming across as

the latter, I do not mean to be the former. The problem is his presence makes no damn sense. I've had twenty minutes to think about it, and it just *doesn't*. And if this is the place and time where I finally croak . . . well, I don't want to die confused.

"Just out on a promenade." He sounds a little out of breath, which means that the climb must have been a tough one. Ian is lots of things, but out of shape is not one of them. "Taking in the scenery. What about you? What brings you here?"

"I'm serious. Why are you in Norway?"

"You know"—the sound briefly cuts, then bounces back with a generous helping of white noise—"not everyone vacations in South Padre. Some of us enjoy cooler destinations." The huffing and puffing through the tenuous satellite line is almost . . . intimate. We're exposed to the same elements, on the same heavily glaciated terrain, while the rest of the world has taken shelter. We're out here, alone.

And it doesn't make any sense.

"When did you fly into Svalbard?" It couldn't have been any time in the last three days, because there were no incoming fights. Svalbard is well connected to Oslo and Tromsø in the peak season, but that won't start until mid-March.

So . . . Ian must have been here for a handful of days. But why? He is chief of engineering on several rover projects, and the *Serendipity* team is approaching crunch time. It makes no sense for one of their key personnel to be in another country right now. Plus, the engineering component of this AMASE is minimal. Only Dr. Merel and me, really. All other members are geologists and astrobiologists, and—

Why the hell is Ian here? Why the hell would NASA send a senior engineer on a rescue mission that wasn't even supposed to happen?

"Are you still doing okay?" he asks again. When I don't reply, he continues: "I'm close. A few minutes away."

I brush snowflakes from my eyelashes. "When did AMASE change its mind on sending relief efforts?"

A brief hesitation. "Actually, it might be more than a few minutes. The storm's intensifying and I can't see very well—"

“Ian, why did they send *you*?”

A deep breath. Or a sigh. Or a puff, louder than the others. “You ask a lot of questions,” he says. Not for the first time.

“Yeah. But they’re pretty good questions, so I’m going to keep on asking more. For instance, how the—”

“As long as I can ask some, too.”

I nearly groan. “What do you want to know? Best concert? Favorite concert? An overview of the amenities of the crevasse? It offers very little in terms of nightlife—”

“I need to know, Hannah, if you are doing okay.”

I close my eyes. The bite of the cold is like a million needles wedged under my skin. “Yes. I . . . I’m fine.”

Suddenly, the call drops. The static, the noise, they all disappear, and I can’t hear Ian anymore. I glance at my satphone and find it still on. *Shit*. The problem is on his end. The snow’s getting thicker, it’ll be pitch-black in minutes, and on top of that I’m almost sure that Ian has been attacked by a polar bear. If something happens to him, I’ll never be able to forgive myse—

I hear steps cracking the snow and look up to the rim of the crevasse. The light is dimming by the second, but I make out the tall, broad outline of a man in a ski mask. He is looking down at me.

Oh God. Is he really . . . ?

“See?” Ian’s deep voice says, just a little out of breath. He lowers his neck warmer before adding, “That wasn’t so hard, was it?”

Chapter 6

Johnson Space Center, Houston, Texas
Six months ago

I am surprised by how much the email hurts, because it's *a lot*.

Not that I expected to be happy about it. It's a well-established fact that hearing that your project has been denied funding is as pleasant as plunging a toilet. But rejections are the bread and butter of all academic journeys, and since starting my Ph.D. I've had approximately twelve hundred fantabillions of them. In the past five years, I've been denied publications, conference presentations, fellowships, scholarships, memberships. I even failed at getting into Bruegger's unlimited-drinks program—a devastating setback, considering my love for iced teas.

The good thing is, the more rejections you get, the easier they are to swallow. What had me punching pillows and plotting murder in the first year of my Ph.D. barely fazed me in the last. *Progress in Aerospace Sciences* saying that my dissertation wasn't worthy of gracing their pages? Fine. National Science Foundation declining to sponsor my postdoctoral studies? Okay. Mara insisting that the Rice Krispies Treats I made for her birthday tasted like toilet paper? Eh. I'll live.

This specific rejection, though, cuts deep. Because I really, really need the grant money for what I'm planning to do.

Most of NASA funding is tied to specific projects, but every year there is a discretionary pot that's up for grabs, usually for junior scientists who come up with research ideas that seem worth exploring. And mine, I think, is pretty worthy. I've been at NASA for over six months. I spent nearly all of them in Norway, at the best

Mars analogue on Earth, knee-deep in intense fieldwork, equipment testing, sampling exercises. For the past couple of weeks, ever since returning to Houston, I've taken my place with the A & PE team, and it's been really, really cool. Ian was right: best team ever.

But. Every break. Every free second. Every weekend. Every scrap of time I could find, I focused on finalizing the proposal for my project, believing that it was a fucking *great* idea. And now that proposal has been rejected. Which feels like being stabbed with a santoku knife.

"Did something happen?" Karl, my office mate, asks from across the desk. "You look like you're about to cry. Or maybe throw something out of the window, I can't tell."

I don't bother to glance at him. "Haven't made up my mind, but I'll keep you updated." I stare at the monitor of my computer, skimming the feedback letters from the internal reviewers.

> As we all know, in early 2010, the rover *Spirit* became stuck in a sand trap, was unable to reorient its solar panels toward the sun, and froze to death as a consequence of its lack of power. Something very similar happened eight years later to *Opportunity*, which went into hibernation when a maelstrom blocked sunlight and prevented it from recharging its batteries. Obviously, the risk of losing control of rovers because of extreme weather events is high. To address this, Dr. Arroyo has designed a promising internal system that is less likely to fail in the case of unpredictable meteorological situations. She proposes to build a model and test its efficacy on the next expedition at the Arctic Mars Analog in Svalbard (AMASE)—
>
> Dr. Arroyo's project is a brilliant addition to NASA's current roster, and it should be approved for further study. Dr. Arroyo's vitae is impressive, and she has accumulated enough experience to carry out the proposed work—
>
> If successful, this proposal will do something critical for NASA's space exploration program: decrease the experience of low-power faults, mission clock faults, and up-loss timer faults in future Mars Exploration missions—

Here is the issue: the reviews are . . . positive. Overwhelmingly positive. Even from a crowd of scientists that, I am well aware, feeds on being mean and scathing. The science doesn't seem to be a problem, the relevance to NASA's mission is there, my CV is good enough, and . . . it doesn't add up. Which is why I'm not going to sit here and take this bullshit.

I slam my laptop closed, aggressively stand from my desk, and march right out of my office.

"Hannah? Where are you—"

I ignore Karl and make my way through the hallways till I find the office I'm looking for.

"Come in," a voice says after my knock.

I met Dr. Merel because he was my direct superior during AMASE, and he is . . . an odd duck, honestly. Very stiff. Very hard-core. NASA is full of ambitious people, but he seems to be almost obsessed with results, publications, the kind of sexy science that makes big splashy news. Initially I wasn't a fan, but I must admit that as a supervisor he's been nothing but supportive. He's the one who selected me for the expedition to begin with, and he encouraged me to apply for funding once I went to him with my project idea.

"Hannah. How nice to see you."

"Do you have a minute to talk?" He's probably in his forties, but there is something old-school about him. Maybe the sweater-vests, or the fact that he's literally the only person I've met at NASA who doesn't go by his first name. He takes off his metal-rimmed glasses, sets them on his desk, then he steeples his fingers to give me a long look. "It's about your proposal, isn't it?"

He doesn't offer me a seat, and I don't take one. But I do close the door behind me. I lean my shoulder against the doorframe and cross my arms on my chest, hoping I won't sound the way I feel, i.e., homicidal. "I just got the rejection email, and I was wondering if you have any . . . insight. The reviews didn't highlight areas needing improvement, so—"

"I wouldn't worry about it," he says dismissively.

I frown. "What do you mean?"

"It's inconsequential."

“I . . . Is it?”

“Yes. Of course it would have been convenient if you’d had those funds at your disposal, but I’ve already discussed it with two of my colleagues who agree that your work is meritorious. They are in control of other funds that Floyd won’t be able to veto, so—”

“Floyd?” I raise my finger. I must have misheard. “Hold up, did you say Floyd? Ian Floyd?” I try to recall if I’ve heard of other Floyds working here. It’s a common last name, but . . .

Merel’s face doesn’t hide much. It’s obvious that he was referring to Ian, and it’s obvious that he wasn’t supposed to bring him up, fucked up by doing it anyway, and now has no choice but to explain to me what he hinted at.

I have exactly zero intention of letting him off the hook.

“This is, of course, confidential,” he says after a brief hesitation.

“Okay,” I agree hurriedly.

“The review process should remain anonymous. Floyd cannot know.”

“He won’t,” I lie. I have no plan at the moment, but part of me already knows that I’m lying. I’m not exactly the nonconfrontational type.

“Very well.” Merel nods. “Floyd was part of the committee that screened your application, and he was the one who decided to veto your project.”

He . . . what?

He what?

No way.

“This doesn’t sound right. Ian isn’t even here in Houston.” I know this because a couple of days after coming back from Norway, I went looking for him. Looked him up on the NASA directory, bought a cup of coffee and one of tea from the cafeteria, then went to his office with only vague ideas of what I’d say, feeling *almost* nervous, and . . .

I found it locked. “He’s at JPL,” someone with a South African accent told me when they noticed me idling in the hallway.

“Oh. Okay.” I turned around. Took two steps away. Then turned back to ask, “When will he be back?”

“Hard to tell. He’s been there for a month or so to work on the sampling tool for *Serendipity*.”

“I see.” I thanked the woman, and this time I left for real.

It’s been a little over a week since then, and I’ve been to his office . . . in a number of instances. I’m not even sure why. And it doesn’t really matter, because the door was closed every single time. Which is how I know that: “Ian is at JPL. He’s not here.”

“You are mistaken,” Merel says. “He’s back.”

I stiffen. “As of when?”

“That, I could not tell you, but he was present when the committee met to discuss your proposal. And like I said, he was the one who vetoed it.”

This is impossible. Nonsensical. “Are you sure it was him?”

Merel gives me an annoyed look and I swallow, feeling oddly . . . exposed, standing the way I am in this office while being told that Ian—Ian? *Really?*—is the reason I didn’t get my funding. It seems like a lie. But would Merel lie? He’s way too straitlaced for that. I doubt he has the imagination.

“Can he do that? Veto a project that’s otherwise well received?”

“Considering his position and seniority, yes.”

“Why, though?”

He sighs. “It could be anything. Perhaps he is jealous of a brilliant proposal, or he’d rather the funding go to someone else. Some of his close collaborators have applied, I hear.” A pause. “Something he said made me suspect that . . .”

“What?”

“That he didn’t believe you capable of doing the work.”

I stiffen. “Excuse me?”

“He didn’t seem to find faults in the proposal. But he did talk about *your* role in it in less-than-flattering tones. Of course, I tried to push back.”

I close my eyes, suddenly nauseous. I cannot believe Ian would do this. I cannot believe he’d be such a backstabbing, miserable dick. Maybe we’re not close friends, but after our last meeting, I thought he . . . I don’t know. I have no idea. I think maybe I had

expectations of *something*, but this puts a swift end to them. “I’m going to appeal.”

“There is no reason to do that, Hannah.”

“There are plenty of reasons. If Ian thinks that I’m not good enough *despite* my CV, I—”

“Do you know him?” Merel interrupts me.

“What?”

“I was wondering if you two know each other?”

“No. No, I . . .” *Once humped his leg. It was fantastic*. “Barely. Just in passing.”

“I see. I was just curious. It would explain why he was so determined about denying your project. I’d never seen him quite so . . . adamant that a proposal not get accepted.” He waves his hand, like this is not important. “But you shouldn’t concern yourself with this, because I have already secured alternative funding for your project.”

Oh. Now *this* I did not expect. “Alternative funding?”

“I reached out to a few team leaders who owed me favors. I asked them if they had any budget surplus they might want to dedicate to your project, and I was able to put together enough to send you back to Norway.”

I half gasp, half laugh. “Really?”

“Indeed.”

“On the next AMASE?”

“The one that leaves in February of next year, yes.”

“What about the help I asked for? I will need one other person to help me build the mini-rover and to be in the field. And I’ll have to travel quite a way from home base, which might be dangerous on my own.”

“I don’t think we’ll be able to finance another expedition member.”

I press my lips together and think about it. I can probably do most of the prep work on my own. If I don’t sleep for the next few months, which . . . I’ve done it before. I’ll be fine. The problem would be when I get to Svalbard. It’s too risky to—

“I’ll be there, out in the field with you, of course,” Dr. Merel says. I’m a little surprised. In the months we were in Norway, I saw him do

very little sample collecting and snow plodding. I've always thought of him as more of a coordinator. But if he offered, he must mean it, and . . . I smile. "Perfect, then. Thank you."

I slip out of the room, and for about two weeks I'm high enough on the knowledge that my project will be happening that I manage to do just that: not let anyone know. I don't even tell Mara and Sadie when we FaceTime, because . . . because to explain the degree of Ian's betrayal, I'd have to admit to the lie I told them years ago. Because I feel like a total idiot for trusting someone who deserves nothing from me. Because being honest with them would first require me to be honest with myself, and I'm too angry, tired, disappointed for that. In my rants, Ian becomes a faceless, anonymous figure, and there is something freeing in that. In not letting myself remember that I used to think of him fondly, and by name.

Then, exactly seventeen days later, I meet Ian Floyd in the stairwell. And that's when everything goes to shit.

• • •

I spot him before he sees me—because of the red, and the general largeness, and the fact that he's climbing up while I'm going down. There are about five elevators here, and I'm not sure why anyone would willingly choose to subject their bodies to the stress of upward stairs, but I'm too shocked that Ian is the one doing it. It's the kind of glory-less overachieving I've come to expect from him.

My first instinct is to push him and watch him fall to his death. Except I'm almost sure it's a felony. Plus, Ian is considerably stronger than me, which means it might not be feasible. *Abort mission,* I tell myself. *Just squeeze by. Ignore him. Not worth your time.*

The problems start when he looks up and notices me. He stops exactly two steps below, which should put him at a disadvantage but, depressingly, unfairly, *tragically*, doesn't. We are at eye level when his eyes widen and his lips curve in a pleased smile. He says, "Hannah," a touch of something in his voice that I recognize but instantly reject, and I have no choice but to acknowledge him.

The staircase is deserted, and sound carries far. His “I came looking for you” is deep and low and vibrates right through me. “Last week. Some guy in your office said you don’t work there much, but —”

“Fuck off.”

The words crash out of me. My temper has always been reckless, one hundred miles per hour, and . . . well. Still is, I guess.

Ian’s reaction is too baffled to be confused. He stares at me like he’s not sure what he just heard, and it’s the perfect chance for me to walk away before I say something I regret. But seeing his face makes me remember Merel’s words, and that . . . that is really not good.

He didn’t believe you capable of doing the work.

The worst part, the one that actually *hurts*, is how thoroughly I misjudged Ian. I actually thought he was a good guy. I liked him a *lot*, when I never let myself like anyone, and . . . how *dare* he? How dare he stab me in the back and then address me as though he’s my friend?

“What exactly is it that you have a problem with, Ian?” I square my shoulders to make myself bigger. I want him to look at me and think of a cruiser tank. I want him to be scared I’m going to pillage him. “Is it that you hate good science? Or is it purely personal?”

He frowns. He has the audacity to *frown*. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“You can cut it. I know about the proposal.”

For a second he is absolutely still. Then his gaze hardens, and he asks, “Who told you?”

At least he’s not pretending not to know what I’m referring to. “Really?” I snort. “Who told me? That’s what seems relevant?”

His expression is stony. “Proceedings regarding the disbursement of internal funding are not public. An anonymous internal peer review is necessary to guarantee—”

“—to guarantee your ability to allocate funding to your close collaborators and fuck up the careers of the ones you have no use for. Right?” He jerks back. Not the reaction I expected, but it fills me with joy nonetheless. “Unless the reason *was* personal. And you

vetoed my proposal because I didn't sleep with you, what, five years ago."

He doesn't deny it, doesn't defend himself, doesn't scream that I'm insane. His eyes narrow to blue slits and he asks, "It was Merel, wasn't it?"

"Why do you care? You *did* veto my project, so—"

"Did he also tell you *why* I vetoed it?"

"I never said that it was Merel who—"

"Because he was there when I explained my objections, at length and in detail. Did he omit that?" I press my lips together. Which he seems to interpret as an opening. "Hannah." He leans closer. We're nose to nose, I smell his skin and his aftershave, and I hate every second of this. "Your project is too dangerous. It specifically asks that you travel to a remote location to drop off equipment at a time of the year in which the weather is volatile and often totally unpredictable. I've been in Longyearbyen in February, and avalanches develop out of the blue. It's only gotten worse in the last few—"

"How many times?"

He blinks at me. "What?"

"How many times have you been to Longyearbyen?"

"I've been on two expeditions—"

"Then you'll understand why I take the opinion of someone who has been on a dozen missions over yours. Plus, we both know what the *real* reason of the veto was."

Ian opens, then closes his mouth. His jaw hardens, and I'm finally sure of it: he's mad. Pissed. I see it in the way he clenches his fist. The flare of his nostrils. His big body is just inches from mine, glowing with anger. "Hannah, Merel is not always trustworthy. There have been incidents under his watch that—"

"What incidents?"

A pause. "It's not my information to disclose. But you shouldn't trust him with your—"

"Right." I scoff. "Of course I should take the word of the guy who went behind my back over the word of the guy who went to bat for me and made sure my project was funded anyway. *Very* hard choice to make."

His hand lifts to close around my upper arm, at once gentle and urgent. I refuse to care enough to pull away from his touch. “What did you just say?”

I roll my eyes. “I said a bunch of things, Ian, but the gist of it was *fuck off.* Now, if you’ll excuse me—”

“What do you mean, Merel made sure that your project was funded anyway?” His grip tightens.

“I mean exactly what I said.” I lean in, eyes locked with his, and for a split second the familiar feeling of being *close, here, near* him crashes over me like a wave. But it washes away just as quickly, and all that is left is an odd combination of vengeful sadness. I have my project, which means that I won. But I also . . . Yeah. I *did* like him. And while he was always just in the periphery of my life, I think maybe I’d hoped . . .

Well. No matter now. “He found an alternative, Ian,” I tell him. “Me and my *inability to carry out the project* are going to Norway, and there is nothing you can do about it.”

He closes his eyes. Then he opens them and mutters something under his breath that sounds a lot like *fuck*, followed by my name and other hurried explanations that I don’t care to listen to. I free my arm from his fingers, meet his eyes one last time, and walk away swearing to myself that this is it.

I will never think of Ian Floyd again.

Chapter 7

Svalbard Islands, Norway
Present

He's not wearing NASA gear.

By now it's nearly dark, the snow falls steadily, and whenever I look up to the edge of the crevasse, huge snowflakes hurl straight into my eyes. But even then, I can tell: Ian is *not* wearing the gear NASA usually issues to AMASE scientists.

His hat and coat are The North Face, a dull black dusted with white, interrupted only by the red of his goggles and ski mask. His phone, when he takes it out to communicate with me from the edge of the crevasse, is not the standard-issue Iridium one, but a model I don't recognize. He stares down for a long moment, as if assessing the shitfuck of a situation I managed to put myself in. Flurries circle around him, but never quite touch. His shoulders rise and fall. One, two, several times. Then, finally, he lifts his goggles and brings the phone to his mouth.

"I'll send down the rope," he says, in lieu of a greeting.

To say that I'm in a bit of a predicament at the moment, or that I have a few problems on my hands, would be a *vast* understatement. And yet, staring up from the place where I was positive I'd bite it until about five minutes ago, all I can think about is that the last time I talked with this man, I . . .

I told him to fuck off.

Repeatedly.

And he did deserve it, at least for saying that I wasn't good enough to carry out the project. But at the time he also mentioned that my mission was going to be too dangerous. And now he's

shown up to the Arctic Circle, with his deep-set blue eyes and even deeper voice, to pull me away from certain death.

I always knew I was an asshole, but I'd never quite realized the extent of it.

"Is this the most massive *I told you so* in history?" I ask, attempting a joke.

Ian ignores me. "Once you have the rope, I'll build an anchor," he says, tone calm and matter-of-fact, not a trace of panic. It's like he's teaching a kid how to tie their shoelaces. No urgency here, no doubt that this will go as planned and we'll both be fine. "I'll prepare the lip and haul you up over my shoulder. Make sure everything is clipped to your belay loop. Can you pull on the fixed side?"

I just stare up at him. I feel . . . I'm not sure what. Confused. Scared. Hungry. Guilty. Cold. After what's probably way too long, I manage to nod.

He smiles a little before throwing down the rope. I watch it uncoil, slither down toward me, and come to rest a couple of inches from where I'm huddled. Then I reach out and close my gloved hand around its end.

I'm still confused, scared, hungry, and guilty. But when I glance up at Ian, maybe I feel a little less cold.

• • •

It's just a sprain, I'm pretty sure. But as far as sprains go, this is a bad one.

Ian is true to his promises and manages to get me out of the crevasse in barely a couple of minutes, but the instant I'm on the surface, I try to limp around, and . . . it's not looking good. My foot touches the ground and pain spears through my entire body like lightning.

"*Fu*—" I press a hand against my lips, trying to hide my gasp in the fabric of my gloves, struggling to keep upright. I'm pretty sure that the loud swishing of the wind swallows my whimper, but there isn't much I can do to help the tears flooding my eyes.

Thankfully, Ian is too busy collecting the rope to notice. “I’ll just need a second,” he says, and I welcome the reprieve. He might have just rescued me from becoming a polar bear’s dessert, but for some reason I hate the idea of him seeing me all weepy and weak. Okay, fine: I needed saving, and maybe I don’t look like much at the moment. But my pain threshold is usually pretty high, and I’ve never been a whiner. I don’t want to give Ian any reason to believe otherwise.

Except.

Except that those two lonely tears have opened the floodgates. Behind me, Ian loads his climbing gear into his backpack, his movements practiced and economical, and I . . . I cannot bring myself to offer any help. I just stand awkwardly, trying to spare my throbbing ankle, on one foot, like a flamingo. My cheeks are hot and wet in the falling snow, and I look down at my stupid crevasse thinking that until a minute ago—until Ian Fucking Floyd—it was going to be the last place I saw. The last slice of sky.

And just like that, a rushing terror punches through me. It knocks out the fabricated quiet of my Martian ocean, and the sheer magnitude of what nearly happened, of all the things I love that I would have missed out on if Ian hadn’t come for me, sweeps through my brain like a rake.

Dogs. Three A.M. in the summer. Sadie and Mara being absolute idiots, and me laughing at them. Hiking trips, kiwi iced tea, that Greek restaurant I never got around to trying, elegant code, the next season of *Stranger Things*, really good sex, a *Nature* publication, seeing humans on Mars, the ending of *A Song of Ice and Fire*—

“We need to be on our way before the storm gets worse,” Ian says. “Are you—”

Ian looks at me, and I don’t even try to hide my face. I’m well past that. When he comes closer, a dark frown on his face, I let him hold my eyes, lift my chin with his fingers, inspect my cheeks. His expression shifts from urgent, to worried, to understanding. I draw in a breath that turns into a gulp. The gulp, to my horror, morphs into a sob. Two. Three. Five. And then . . .

Then I'm just a fucking mess. Blubbering pitifully, like a child, and when a warm, heavy body wraps around me and grips me tightly, I offer no resistance.

"I'm sorry," I murmur into the nylon of Ian's jacket. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry. I— I have no clue what's wrong with me, I—" It's just that I hadn't known. Down in the crevasse, I was able to pretend it wasn't happening. But now that I'm out, and I don't feel numb anymore, it's all flooding back, and I cannot stop seeing them, all the things, *all the things* that I almost—

"Shh." Ian's hands feel impossibly large as they move up and down my back, cupping my head, stroking my snow-damp hair where it spills from under the hat. We are in the icy middle of a storm, but this close to him, I feel almost peaceful. "Shh. It's okay."

I cling to him. He lets me sob for long moments we cannot afford, pressing me against him with no air between us, until I can feel his heartbeat through the thick layers of our clothes. Then he mumbles "Fucking Merel" with barely restrained fury, and I think that it would be so easy to blame things on Merel, but the truth is, it's all my fault.

When I lean back to tell him, he cups my face. "We really need to go. I'll carry you to the coast. I have a light brace for your ankle, just to avoid messing it up even more."

"The coast?"

"My boat is less than an hour away."

"*Your* boat?"

"Come on. We have to get going before more snow falls."

"I—maybe I can walk. I can at least try—"

He smiles, and the thought that I could have died—I could have *died*—without being smiled at like this, by *this man*, has my lips trembling. "I don't mind carrying you." A dimple appears. "Do try to contain your love for crevasses, please."

I glare at him through the tears. As it turns out, it's exactly what he wants from me.

• • •

Ian carries me almost all the way.

To say that he does it without breaking a sweat, in the whiteout of a thickening snowstorm, in negative-ten-degree-Celsius weather, would probably be a bit of an exaggeration. He smells salty and warm as he deposits me on one of the bunks on the lower deck of the boat, a small expedition ship named M/S *Sjøveien*. I do spot little droplets of perspiration here and there, and they make his forehead and upper lip shine before he wipes them with the sleeves of his coat.

Still, I can't quite get over the relative ease with which he made his way through glaciated plateaus for over an hour, wading through old and fresh snow, sidestepping rocky formations and ice algae, never once complaining about my arms coiled tight around his neck.

He almost slipped twice. Both times, I felt the steel of his muscles as they tensed to avoid the fall, his large body solid and reliable as it balanced and reoriented before picking up the pace again. Both times, I felt bizarrely, incomprehensibly safe.

"I need you to let AMASE know that you're safe," he tells me the second we're on the boat. I look around, noticing for the first time that there are no other passengers on board. "And that you don't need responders to come out once the storm lets up."

I frown. "Wouldn't they know that you already—"

"Right now. Please." He stares pointedly until I compose and send a message to the entire AMASE group, in a way that reminds me that he is very much a leader. Used to people doing as he says. "We have a space heater, but it's not going to do a whole lot in this temperature." He takes off his jacket, revealing a black thermal underneath. His hair is messy, and bright, and beautiful. Not nearly as disgustingly hat-squished as mine, an inexplicable phenomenon which should be the object of several research studies. Maybe I'll apply for a grant to investigate it. Then Ian will veto me, and we'll be back to Mutual Hate square one. "The winds are more severe than I'd like, but on board is still a safer option than ashore. We're anchored, but the waves might get nasty. There's anti-seasickness meds next to your bunk, and—"

"Ian."

He falls quiet.

“Why are you not wearing a NASA survival suit?”

He doesn’t look at me. Instead he drops on his knees in front of me and begins to work on my brace. His large hands are firm but delicate on my calf. “Are you sure it’s not broken? Is it painful?”

“Yes. And yes, but getting better.” The heat, or at least the lack of freezing winds, is helping. Ian’s grip, comforting and warm around my swollen ankle, doesn’t hurt, either. “This isn’t a NASA boat, either.” Not that I expected it to be. I think I know what’s going on here.

“It’s what we had at our disposal.”

“We?”

He still doesn’t meet my eyes. Instead he tightens the brace and pulls a thick woolen sock over my foot. I think I feel the ghosts of fingertips trailing briefly across my toe, but maybe it’s my impression. It must be.

“You should drink. And eat.” He straightens. “I’ll get you—”

“Ian,” I interrupt softly. He pauses, and we both seem simultaneously taken aback at my tone. It’s just . . . pleading. Tired. I’m usually not one for displays of vulnerability, but . . . Ian has come for me, in a small rocking boat, across the fjords. We are alone in the Arctic Basin, surrounded by twenty-thousand-year-old glaciers and shrieking winds. There is *nothing* usual about this. “Why are you here?”

He lifts one eyebrow. “What? You miss your crevasse? I can take you back if—”

“No, really—why are you here? On this boat? You’re not part of this year’s AMASE. You shouldn’t even be in Norway. Don’t they need you at JPL?”

“They’ll be fine. Plus, sailing is a passion of mine.” He’s obviously being evasive, but the cold must have frozen my brain cells, because all I want right now is to find out more about Ian Floyd’s passions. True or made up.

“Is it really?”

He shrugs, noncommittal. “We used to sail a lot when I was a kid.”

“We?”

“My dad and I.” He stands and turns away from me, starting to rummage in the little compartments in the hull. “He’d bring me along when he had to work.”

“Oh. Was he a fisherman?”

I hear a fond snort. “He smuggled drugs.”

“He *what*?”

“He smuggled drugs. Weed, for the most—”

“No, I heard you the first time, but . . . seriously?”

“Yup.”

I frown. “Are you . . . Are you okay? Is that even . . . Is that a thing, smuggling weed on boats?”

He’s tinkering with something, giving me his back, but he turns just enough for me to catch the curve of his smile. “Yeah. Illegal, but a thing.”

“And your father would take you?”

“Sometimes.” He turns around, holding a small tray. He always looks big, but hunched in the too-low deck he feels like the Great Barrier Reef. “It would drive my mom crazy.”

I laugh. “She didn’t like her son being part of the family criminal enterprise?”

“Go figure.” His dimple disappears. “They’d yell about it for hours. No wonder Mars began sounding so attractive.”

I cock my head and study his expression. “Is that why you grew up not knowing Mara?”

“Who is M— Oh. Yeah. For the most part. Mom isn’t very fond of the Floyd side of the family. Though I’m sure he’s the black sheep by their standards, too. I wasn’t really allowed to spend time with him, so . . .” He shakes his head, as if to change the topic. “Here. It’s not much, but you should eat.”

I have to force myself to look away from his face, but when I notice the peanut butter and jelly sandwiches he made, my stomach cramps with happiness. I wiggle in the bunk until I’m sitting straighter, take off my jacket, and then immediately attack the food. My relationship with eating is much less complicated than the one with Ian Floyd, after all, and I lose myself in the straightforward, soothing act of chewing for . . . for a long time, probably.

When I swallow the last bite, I remember that I'm not alone and notice him staring at me with an amused expression.

"Sorry." My cheeks warm. I brush the crumbs from my thermal shirt and lick some jam off the corner of my mouth. "I'm a fan of peanut butter."

"I know."

He does? "You do?"

"Wasn't your graduation cake just a giant Reese's cup?"

I bite the inside of my cheek, taken aback. It was the one Mara and Sadie got me after I defended my thesis. They got tired of me licking frosting and peanut butter filling off the Costco sheet cakes they usually bought and just ordered me a giant cup. But I have no recollection of ever telling Ian. I barely think of it, honestly. I remember about it only when I log into my barely used Instagram, because the picture of the three of us digging in is the last thing I ever posted—

"You should rest while you can," Ian tells me. "The storm should ease up by early tomorrow morning and we'll sail out. I'll need your help in this shit visibility."

"Okay," I agree. "Yeah. But I still don't understand how you can be here alone if—"

"I'll go check that everything is all right. I'll be back in a minute." He disappears before I can ask exactly what he needs to check on. And he's not back in a minute—or even before I lean back in the bunk, decide to rest my eyes for just a couple of minutes, and fall asleep, dead to the world.

• • •

The bark of the wind and the rhythmic rocking of the boat rouse me, but what keeps me awake is the chill.

I look around in the blue glow of the emergency lamp and find Ian a few feet away from me, sleeping on the other bunk. It's too short, and barely wide enough to accommodate him, but he seems to make do. His hands are folded neatly on his stomach, and the

covers are kicked to his feet, which tells me that the cabin is probably not as cold as I currently feel.

Not that it matters: it's as if the hours spent outside have seeped into my bones to keep on icing me from the inside. I try to huddle under the covers for a few minutes, but the shivering only gets worse. Perhaps strong enough to dislodge some kind of important cerebral pathway, because without really knowing why, I get out of my bunk, wrap the blanket around myself, and limp across the rolling floor in Ian's direction.

When I lie down next to him, he blinks, groggy and mildly startled. And yet his first reaction is not to throw me in the sea but to push toward the bulkhead to make room for me.

He's a way better person than I'll ever be.

"Hannah?"

"I just . . ." My teeth are chattering. Again. "I can't get warm."

He doesn't hesitate. Or maybe he does, but just a fraction of a second. He opens his arms and pulls me to his chest, and . . . I fit inside them so perfectly, it's as though there were a spot ready for me all along. A five-year-old spot, familiar and cozy. A delicious, warm nook that smells of soap and sleep, freckles and pale, sweaty skin.

It makes me want to cry again. Or laugh. I cannot remember the last time I felt this fragile and confused.

"Ian?"

"Hm?" His voice is rough, all chest. This is what he sounds like when he wakes up. What he would have sounded like the morning after if I'd agreed to go to dinner with him.

"How long have you been in Svalbard?"

He sighs, a warm chuff on the crown of my hair. I must be catching him off guard, because this time he answers the question. "Six days."

Six days. That's one day before *I* arrived. "Why?"

"Vacation." He nuzzles my head with his chin.

"Vacation," I repeat. His thermal is soft under my lips.

"Yeah. I had"—he yawns against my scalp—"lots of time left over."

"And you decided to spend it in Norway?"

“Why do you sound incredulous? Norway’s a good place. It has fjords and ski resorts and museums.”

Except that’s not where he is. Not at a ski resort, and most definitely not at a museum. “Ian.” It feels so intimate, to say his name so close to him. To press it into his chest as my fingers curve into his shirt. “How did you know?”

“Know what?”

“That my project was going to be such a shitshow. That I . . . That I wasn’t going to be able to finish my project.” I am going to start crying again. Possibly. Likely. “Was it—was it that obvious? Am I just this total, giant, incompetent asshole who decided to do whatever the fuck she wanted despite everyone else telling her that she was going to—”

“No, no, shh.” His arms tighten around me, and I realize that I am, in fact, crying. “You are not an asshole, Hannah. And you are *the opposite* of incompetent.”

“But you vetoed me because I—”

“Because of the intrinsic danger of a project like yours. For the past few months, I tried to get this project stopped in about ten different ways. Personal meetings, emails, appeals—I tried it all. And even the people who agreed with me that it was too dangerous would not step in to prevent it. So no, you’re not the asshole, Hannah. They are.”

“What?” I shift on my elbow to hold his eyes. The blue is pitch-black in the night. “Why?”

“Because it’s a great project. It’s absolutely brilliant, and it has the potential to revolutionize future space exploration missions. High risk, high reward.” His fingers push a strand behind my ear, then run down my hair. “*Too* high risk.”

“But Merel said that—”

“Merel is a fucking idiot.”

My eyes widen. Ian’s tone is exasperated and furious and not at all what I’d expect from his usually calm, aloof self. “Well, Dr. Merel has a doctorate from Oxford and I believe is a MENSA member, so —”

“He’s a moron.” I shouldn’t laugh, or burrow even closer to Ian, but I cannot help myself. “He was at AMASE when I was here, too. There were two serious injuries during my second expedition, and both of them happened because he pushed scientists to finish fieldwork when conditions weren’t optimal.”

“Wait, seriously?” He nods curtly. “Why is he still at NASA?”

“Because his negligence was hard to prove, and because AMASE members sign waivers. Like you did.” He takes a deep breath, trying to calm down. “Why were you out there alone?”

“I needed to drop off the equipment. The storm wasn’t forecasted. But then there was an avalanche nearby, I got scared that my mini-rover would get damaged, started running away without looking, and —”

“No—why were you *alone*, Hannah? You were supposed to have someone else with you. That’s what the proposal said.”

“Oh.” I swallow. “Merel was supposed to come for backup. But he wasn’t feeling well. I offered to wait for him, but he said we’d be losing valuable days of data and that I should just go alone, and I . . .” I squeeze my fingers around the material of Ian’s shirt. “I went. And then, when I called in for help, he told me that the weather was turning, and . . .”

“Fuck,” he mutters. His arms tighten around me, nearly painful. “Fuck.”

I wince. “I know you’re mad at me. And you have every right—”

“I’m not mad at *you*,” he says, sounding mad at me. “I’m mad at fucking—” I study him, skeptical, as he inhales deeply. Exhales. Inhales again. He seems to cycle through a few emotions that I’m not sure I understand, and ends with: “I’m sorry. I apologize. I usually don’t . . .”

“Get mad?”

He nods. “I’m usually better at . . .”

“Caring less?” I finish for him, and he closes his eyes and nods again.

Okay. This is starting to make sense.

“AMASE didn’t send you,” I say. It’s not a question. Ian won’t admit it to me, but in this bunk, next to him, it’s so obvious what

happened. He came to Norway to keep me safe. Every step of the way, all he did was to keep me safe. “How did you know that I was going to need you?”

“I didn’t, Hannah.” His chest rises and falls in a deep sigh. Another man would be gloating by now. Ian . . . I think he just wishes he could have spared me this. “I was just afraid that something might happen to you. And I don’t trust Merel. Not with you.” He says it—*you*—like I am a remarkable and important thing. The most precious data point; his favorite town; the loveliest, starkest Martian landscape. Even though I pushed him away, over and over, he still came in a rocking boat in the middle of the coldest ocean on planet Earth, just to get me warm.

I try to lift my head and look up at him, but he presses on it gently and keeps stroking my hair. “You really should rest.”

He’s right. We both should. So I push a leg between his, and he lets me. Like his body is a thing of mine. “I am sorry. About what I said to you back in Houston.”

“Shh.”

“And that I’ve put you in danger—”

“Shh, it’s okay.” He kisses my temple. It’s wet from the slide of my tears. “It’s okay.”

“It’s not. You could be working with your team, or asleep in your own bed, but you’re here because of me, and—”

“Hannah, there is nowhere else I’d rather be.”

I laugh, watery. “Not even—not even literally *anywhere* else?”

I hear him chuckle just before I fall asleep.

Chapter 8

Before we can leave for Houston, we spend one night in a hotel in Longyearbyen, Svalbard's main settlement. It offers a bottomless breakfast buffet and keeps the rooms' temperature about ten degrees higher than needed for comfortable inside dwelling—truly the stuff of post-crevasse-Hannah's dreams. I'm not sure whether Ian shares my bliss, as he disappears as soon as I'm settled in. It's fine, though, because I have stuff to do. Mostly writing a detailed report updating NASA on what happened, which doesn't mention Ian (at his request) but ends in a formal complaint against Merel. After that, I stumble upon a rare moment of grace: I manage to connect to the mini-rover out in the field. I let out a squeal of delight when I realize that it's collecting the precise type of data I needed. I stare at the incoming feed, remember what Ian said on the boat about how valuable my project would be for future missions, and nearly tear up.

I don't know. I must be still shaken up.

We leave the following day. I've done what I came to AMASE for (surprisingly successfully), and Ian needs to be at JPL in three days. The first plane ride is from Svalbard to Oslo, on one of those minuscule aircraft that take off from minuscule airports with their minuscule seats and minuscule complimentary snacks. Ian and I don't get to sit next to each other, nor do we from Oslo to Frankfurt. I pass the time staring out of the window and watching *JAG* reruns with Norwegian subtitles. By the end of the third episode, I strongly suspect *skyldig* means "guilty."

"I guess *ikke* means 'not,' then," Ian tells me as he wheels my still-injured self through the Frankfurt airport. I turn back to look up at him, puzzled. "What? I was watching *JAG*, too. It's a good show. Reminds me of my childhood."

“Really? You used to watch a show about military lawyers with your weird smuggler dad?”

He gives me a sheepish look, and I burst into laughter.

“Do Harm and Mac end up together in the end?” I ask him.

He half smiles. “No spoilers.”

“Oh, come on.”

“You’ll have to watch to find out.”

“Or I could look it up on Wikipedia.”

He keeps on smiling, like he thinks that I won’t. He’s right.

We are together for the last leg of the trip. Ian lets me have the window seat without me having to ask, and settles by my side after putting away our bags and wedging a pillow under my brace. He is broad and solid, his legs cramped and too long for the little space he has, and once we’re both buckled in, it feels like he’s blocking away the rest of the world. A wall, keeping me safe from the noise and the action. I’ve been restless ever since the boat and haven’t managed more than very brief naps, but a few minutes after we take off, I feel myself starting to doze, exhausted. The last thing I do before falling asleep is lean my head against Ian’s shoulder. The last thing I remember him doing is shifting a little lower, to make sure that I’m as comfortable as I can be.

I wake up somewhere over the Atlantic and stay exactly where I am for several minutes, my temple against his arm, the clean smell of his clothes and his skin in my nostrils. He’s looking at his tablet, reading an article on plasma propulsion. I skim a few lines in the methods section before saying: “I’m usually not like this.”

He doesn’t seem surprised that I’m awake. “Like how?”

I think about it. “Needy.” I think some more. “Clingy.”

“I know.” I can’t see his face, but his voice is low and kind.

“How do you know?”

“I know you.”

My first instinct is to bristle and push back. Something within me rejects being known, because being known means being rejected. Doesn’t it? “You don’t, though. Really know me. I mean, we never even fucked.”

“True.” He nods, and his jaw brushes against my hair. “Would you have let me get to know you if we had fucked?”

“Nah.” I yawn and straighten, arching to stretch my sore back. “Do you ever think about it?”

“About what?”

“Five years ago. That afternoon.”

“I think about it a lot,” he says immediately, without hesitating. His expression is undecipherable to me. Utterly unreadable.

“Is that why you came to rescue me?” I tease. “Because you were thinking about it? Because you have been secretly pining for years?”

He meets my eyes squarely. “I don’t know that there was anything secret about that.”

He goes back to his tablet, still calm, still relaxed. Then, after several minutes and a couple of yawns, he closes his eyes and tips his head back against the seat. This time he’s the one to fall asleep, and I’m left awake, staring at the strong line of his throat, unable to stop my head from spinning in a million different directions.

• • •

When we step out of the TSA area of the Houston airport, there is a sign in the crowd, similar to the ones limo drivers hold up in movies when they’re picking up important clients they’re afraid they won’t recognize.

HANNAH ARROYO, it says. And underneath: WHO ALMOST DIED AND DIDN’T EVEN TELL US. ALSO, SHE ALWAYS FORGETS TO REPLACE THE TOILET PAPER ROLL. WHAT A LITTLE SHIT.

It’s a pretty big sign. All the more because it’s held by two not-very-tall girls, a redhead and a brunette, who are very obviously glaring at me.

I turn around to Ian. He slept on and off for the past four hours and still looks groggy, his face soft and relaxed. *Cute*, I think. And immediately after: *Delicious*. *Handsome. Want*. I say none of it and instead ask, “What are my idiot friends doing here?”

He shrugs. “I figured you might want to talk through your near-death experience with someone, so I decided to tell Mara what

happened. I did not expect her to come in person."

"Bold of you to assume I didn't tell her myself."

His eyebrow lifts. "Did you?"

"I was *going to*. Once I felt less *whiny*. And—whatever." I roll my eyes. Wow, I'm mature. "How did you go from not remembering Mara's name to having her number?"

"I had to do unspeakable things."

I gasp. "Not Great-Aunt Delphina."

He presses his lips together and nods, slowly, wretchedly.

"Ian, I am so sor—"

I cannot finish the sentence, because I'm being tackled by two small but surprisingly strong goblins. I wobble on my one functioning ankle, nearly choking when their arms squeeze tight around my neck.

"Why are you guys here?"

"Because," Mara says against my shoulder. They are both full-on crying—so weak, so tenderhearted. God, I love them.

"Guys. Get it together. I didn't even *die*."

"What about frostbite?" Sadie murmurs into my armpit. I'd forgotten how fantastically short she is.

"Not much."

"How many toes amputated?"

"Three."

"That's not bad," Mara says with a sniffle. "Cheaper pedis."

I laugh and inhale deeply. They smell wonderful, a mix of mundane and familiar, like airport terminals and their favorite shampoos I used to steal and our cramped Pasadena apartment. "Seriously, guys, what are you doing here? Don't you have, like, work to do?"

"We took two days off, and my neighbor is watching Ozzy, you *ingrate hag*," Sadie tells me before starting to cry harder. I pull her even closer and pat her on the back.

A few feet from us, two tall men are talking quietly to each other. I recognize Liam and Erik from their guest appearances on our late-night FaceTime hangouts, and wave at them with my best *These*

two, amirite? expression. They wave back and answer with fond nods that tell me they 500 percent agree.

"Oh—Ian? You're Ian, right?" Mara detaches from our hug-lump. "Thank you so much for calling us, this moron would have never told us the extent of what happened. And, um, I'm sorry I haven't been in touch for the past . . . fifteen years?"

"Don't apologize," I tell her. "He thought your name was Melissa till twenty minutes ago."

She frowns. "What? For real?"

Ian blinks from my side, looking slightly abashed.

"Well, still." She shrugs. "I promise I don't have anything against you personally. I'm just not generally a fan of the Floyd family."

"Neither am I."

Mara's eyes lit up. "They're horrible people, right?"

"The worst."

"*Thank you.* Hey, we should secede! Form our own official branch of the family. That video of you peeing in a Lowe's that they forced me to watch over and over? I'd never mention it again."

Ian smiles. "Sounds great."

Mara smiles back, but then she leans back in to hug me once again and whisper in my ear, "I'm not even sure he's really a Floyd. His hair is *barely* red."

I burst into laughter. I think I'm home for real.

• • •

I want to stay awake and bask in the joy of having Sadie and Mara in my living space again, but I fail and conk out the second we get to my place. I wake up in the middle of the night, Sadie and Mara on either side of me in my queen-size bed, and my heart is so full, I'm afraid it'll overflow. Apparently this is what I am now, a unicorn rainbow marshmallow kitten creature. *Bah.* I wonder groggily where their boyfriends went, promptly fall back asleep, and find out the answer only several hours later, when the sun shines bright into my kitchen and we're sitting at my cluttered table.

“They were going to stay in a hotel,” Mara says. She is having Cheez-Its for breakfast without even bothering to look ashamed. “But Ian told them they could bunk with him.”

“He did?” My fridge is full, even though I unplugged it before leaving for Norway. There are several new boxes of cereal on top of it, and fresh fruit in a basket that I didn’t know I owned. I wonder which one of the dependable adults in my life is responsible for this. “Does he have the space?”

“He said he has a big place.”

“Hmm.” I can’t believe Sadie’s Viking boyfriend gets to see Ian’s apartment before I do. Oh well.

“So,” she says, “this seems like the perfect opening to grill you and find out whether you’re boinking Mara’s relative. But it’s obvious that you are. Plus, you just almost Popsicled yourself at the North Pole. So we’ll go easy on you.”

“That is very considerate.” I pluck a grape from the mysterious bowl. “I’m not, though.”

“Bullshit.”

“No, really. We fooled around five years ago, when we met up for Helena’s interview. Then we had a huge argument six months ago, when I told him to fuck off after he vetoed my expedition because it was too dangerous—not because he thought I was an idiot, like someone told me. *Then* he came to save my life when I almost died on said expedition.” I don’t mention our night together on the boat, because . . . there’s nothing to say, really. Technically, nothing happened.

“As far as Told You Sos go, this is an excellent one,” Mara says.

“Right? That’s what I thought!”

“Hang on,” Sadie interjects. “Did we know that he was the one who vetoed your proposal? And did we know about the fooling-around-five-years-ago bit? Did we *forget*?”

“We did not,” Mara says. “We would *not* have forgotten. Thank you for keeping us updated on your life, Hannah.”

“Would you have cared to know?”

Their *Hell, yeah*s are simultaneous.

Right. Of course. “Okay, let’s see. We kind of made out at JPL. Then he asked me out for dinner. I said that I didn’t date, but I’d fuck him anyway. He wasn’t interested and we went our separate ways.” I shrug. “Now you know.”

Mara glares at me. “Wow. So timely.”

I blow her a kiss.

“But things have changed, right?” Sadie asks. “I mean . . . last night he carried you upstairs for seven floors because the elevator was broken. It’s obvious that he has a thing for you.”

“Yes,” Mara agrees. “Are you going to break my blood relative’s heart? Don’t get me wrong, I’d still side with you. Hos before bros.”

“He’s not your bro in any sense of the word,” I point out.

“Hey, he’s my cousin-or-something.”

Sadie pats her on the shoulder. “It’s the *or something* that gets me every time. You can really feel the unbreakable family ties.”

“We seceded last night. We’re the founders of the Floyds 2.0. And you”—she points at me—“could be one of us.”

“Could I?”

“Yes. If you gave Ian a chance.”

“I . . . I don’t know.” I think about how he squeezed my hand while the plane landed. About the way he asked for cookies instead of pretzels, because I told him that they’re my favorite. About his arm around my shoulders back in Norway while the concierge checked us into our rooms. About him falling asleep next to me, and me realizing how taxing, how physically demanding it must have been to come extract me from the idiotic situation I put myself into—no matter that he didn’t so much as roll his eyes at the burden of it.

I don’t like the word *dating*. I don’t like the *idea* of it. But with Ian . . . I don’t know. It seems different with him.

“I guess we’ll see. I’m not sure *he* would want to date,” I say, staring at Sadie’s Froot Loops. The ensuing silence drags on so long, I’m forced to look up. She and Mara are staring at me like I just announced that I’m quitting my job to take up macramé full-time. “What?”

“Did she really just use the world *date*?” Mara asks Sadie, pretending I’m not sitting *right here*.

“I think so. And *without* referring to the disgusting fruit?”

Mara frowns. “Dude, dates are amazing.”

“No, they’re not.”

“Yes. Try wrapping them in bacon.”

“Okay,” Sadie acknowledges, “*anything* is amazing if you wrap it in bacon, but—”

I clear my throat. They turn to me.

“So, you’re gonna go out with him?”

I shrug. Think about it. The idea is so foreign, my brain catches on it for a moment. But remembering the way Ian smiled at me back in Svalbard helps me push right through it. “I think I’ll ask. If he wants to.”

“Considering that he saved your life, contacted Great-Aunt Delphina, and put up two dudes he’s never seen before so their girlfriends could hang out with you . . . I think maybe he does.”

I nod, my eyes fixed into the mid-distance. “You know, when I fell, my expedition leader said that no one was coming to rescue me. But . . . he came. Ian came. Even though he wasn’t even supposed to be there.”

Sadie frowns. “Are you saying that you feel like you *have to* date him because of that?”

“Nah.” I grin at her. “As you know, it’s pretty impossible to get me to do something I don’t want to.”

Sadie bats her eyes at me. “I always manage.”

“Not true.”

“Yes, I do. For instance, in ten minutes I’m going to take you to the NASA doctor Ian wrote down the address for, and we’re going to get your foot checked out.”

I scowl. “No way.”

“I am.”

“Sadie, I’m fine.”

“You really think you’re going to win this?”

“Fuck yeah.”

She leans forward over her bowl of cereal with a small smile. “It’s *on*, baby. Let the best bitch win.”

• • •

Sadie, naturally, wins.

After the doctor tells me stuff I already knew—high sprain, yada yada—and gives me a better brace I can walk on, I take Sadie and Mara to my favorite coffee shop. Their planes are leaving late tonight, and we squeeze as much as we possibly can out of the day. When we get to Ian's apartment, I expect . . .

I don't know, actually. Based on what I know of the guys' personalities, I figured we'd find them brooding in silence, checking their work emails. Occasionally clearing their throats, maybe. But Ian buzzes us into his place, and when we walk into the wide living room, we discover all three of them sprawled on the huge sectional, each holding a PlayStation controller as they yell in the direction of the TV. Further inspection reveals that Liam's and Ian's avatars are shooting at some gelatinous monster, while Erik's huddles in the far corner of the screen. He's yelling something that could be Danish. Or Klingon.

None of them look like they've bothered to shower or change out of their pajamas. There are two empty pizza boxes on the wooden coffee table, beer cans scattered all over the floor, and I'm pretty sure I just stepped on a Cheeto. We stop in our tracks at the entrance, but if the guys notice our arrival, they don't show it. They keep on playing until Liam gets hit by a stray bullet and grunts like a wounded animal.

"I hate that I love him," Mara mutters under her breath.

Sadie sighs. "At least yours isn't running against the wall because he can't use the controller?"

"Guys," I tell them, shaking my head, "maybe I was wrong in approving of your relationships. Maybe you can do better."

Mara snorts. "Excuse me? Is that a slice of pepperoni on Ian's shirt?"

Sure is. "Touché."

Sadie clears her throat. "Hey, guys, it's great that you're having fun, but we should really get going if we want to make our flights—"

They groan in a chorus. Like ten-year-olds asked to clean their rooms.

“I just . . . can’t believe they actually *like* each other,” Mara says, befuddled.

Sadie nods. “I don’t know how I feel about this. Seems . . . dangerous?”

I cover my mouth to muffle my laughter.

Chapter 9

Ian drives me home after we drop everybody off at the airport, following a disturbing phone number exchange among the guys and a few tears from Mara and Sadie. I'm definitely feeling more like myself, because I send them through TSA with a stern "Stop whining" and gentle slaps on their butts.

"Try not to fall into a glacier for at least six months, okay?" Sadie yells at me from within the roped area.

I flip her off and limp back to Ian's car.

"I see why you love them so much," he tells me while driving back to my place.

"I don't. Love them, that is. I just pretend to avoid hurting their feelings."

He smiles like he knows how full of bullshit I am to the very milligram, and we're quiet for the rest of the ride. The oldies radio station plays pop songs that I remember from the early 2000s, and I stare at the yellow glow of the streetlights, wondering if I, too, am an oldie. Then Ian slows down to park at my place, and that relaxed, happy feeling wanes as my heart picks up speed.

I told Sadie and Mara that I'd see if he's interested in going out with me, but it's easier said than done. I've propositioned plenty of people, but this . . . it feels different. I'm not going to be good at it. I'm going to be total, utter shit. And Ian will realize it immediately.

"You could . . ." I start. Then stop. My knees suddenly look incredibly interesting. Works of art that require my most dedicated inspection. "I was thinking that . . ."

"Don't worry, I'll carry you upstairs," he says. He's wearing jeans and an ocean-blue shirt that matches his eyes and contrasts with his hair and—

It's scary, how attractive I find him. The depth of this crush of mine. I liked him since the very start, but my feelings for him have been growing steadily, then exponentially, and . . . what do I even *do* with them? It's like being handed an instrument I never learned how to play. Being asked to step onstage at a concert hall utterly unprepared.

I take a deep breath.

"Actually, they fixed the elevator. And this new cast is easy to walk on. So, no need. But you . . ." *You can do this, Hannah. Come on. You just survived polar bears thanks to this guy*. *You can say the words.* "You could come up anyway."

A long silence follows, in which I feel my heartbeat in every inch of my body. It draws out till it gets unbearable, and when I cannot help but glance up, I find Ian looking at me with an expression that can be described only as . . . sorry. Like he knows very well that he's going to have to let me down.

Shit.

"Hannah," he says, apologetic. "I don't think it's a good idea."

"Right." I swallow and nod. Push the weight in my chest to the side for an unspecified *later*. God, that later is going to be *bad*. "Okay."

He nods, too, relieved at my understanding. My heart breaks a little. "But if you need anything, anything at all—"

"—you'll be there. Right." I smile, and . . . maybe I'm not 100 percent yet, because I'm starting to feel teary all over again. "Thank you, Ian. For everything. Absolutely everything. I still cannot believe you came for me."

He cocks his head. "Why?"

"I don't know. I just . . ." I could bullshit an answer for him. But it seems unfair. He's earned more from me. "I just can't believe that *anyone* would do that for me."

"Right." He sighs and bites into his lower lip. "Hannah, if that changes. If you ever find yourself able to believe that someone could care about you that much. And if you wanted to actually . . . *have dinner* with that someone." He lets out a laugh. "Well . . . Please, consider me. You know where to find me."

“Oh. Oh, I . . .” I feel heat creep up my face. Am I blushing? I didn’t even know my body was capable of it. “I actually wasn’t asking you to come up just for . . . I mean, maybe that, too, but mostly . . .” I screw my eyes shut. “I expressed myself poorly. I was inviting you up because I would love to *have dinner*. With *you*,” I blurt out.

When I find the guts to open my eyes, Ian’s expression is stunned.

“Are you . . .” I think he forgot how to breathe. He clears his throat, coughs once, swallows, coughs again. “Are you serious?”

“Yes. I mean,” I hurry to add, “I still think you won’t like it. I’m just . . . really *not* that kind of person.”

“What kind of person?”

“The kind that people enjoy being with for anything that isn’t . . . well, sex. Or sex related. Or directly leading up to sex.”

“Hannah.” He gives me a skeptical look. “You have two friends who dropped everything to be with you. And I assume sex wasn’t involved.”

“It wasn’t. And I—I would drop everything for them, but they’re different. They’re my people, and—” Shit, I really *am* about to tear up. What the hell, you almost die once and your mental stability gets all fucked up? “There are plenty of people who would disagree. Like my family. And you . . . You’ll probably end up not liking me.”

He smiles. “Seems improbable, since I already like you.”

“Then you’ll stop. You—” I run a hand through my hair, wishing he understood. “You’ll change your mind.”

He looks at me like I’m just a bit crazy. “In the span of one dinner?”

“Yes. You’ll think I’m a waste of your time. Boring.”

He’s starting to just look . . . amused. Like I’m ridiculous. Which . . . I don’t know. Maybe I am. “If that happens, I’ll just put you to work. Have you debug some of my code.”

I laugh a little and look out of the window. There are no cars at this time of night, no one walking their dog or taking a stroll. It’s just Ian and me on the street. I love it and hate it. “I still think you’d get the most out of this if we fucked,” I mutter.

“I agree.”

I turn to him, surprised. “You do?”

“Of course. You think I *don’t* want to fuck you?”

“I . . . Kind of?”

“Hannah.” He unbuckles his seat belt and angles himself toward me, so that I have no choice but to look him in the eyes. He looks earnest and nearly offended. “I have thought about what happened in my office every day for the past five years. You offered to go down on me, and I just . . . embarrassed myself, and it should be the most mortifying memory I have, but for some reason it’s turned into the axis every fantasy of mine spins around, and”—he reaches up to pinch the bridge of his nose—“I want to fuck you. Obviously. Always have. I just don’t want to fuck you *once*. I want to do it a lot. For a long time. I want you to come to me for sex, but also want you to come to me when you need help with your taxes and moving your furniture. I want fucking to be only one of the million things I do for you, and I want to be—” He stops. Seems to collect himself and straightens, as if to give me space. To give *us* space. “I’m sorry. I don’t want to crowd you. You can . . .”

He pulls back a few inches, and all I can do is look at him openmouthed. Shocked. Speechless. Absolutely . . . yeah. Did this really happen? Is it really happening? And the worst part is, I’m almost positive that his words have dislodged something in my brain, because the only thing I can think of saying in response to all he said is: “Is that a yes on dinner?”

He laughs, low and beautiful and a little rueful. And after looking at me like no one else ever has before, what he says is, “Yes, Hannah. It is a yes on dinner.”

• • •

“Um, I could make us a . . .” I scratch my head, studying the contents of my open fridge. Okay, so it’s full. The problem is, it’s full exclusively of stuff that needs to be cooked, chopped, baked, prepared. Stuff that’s healthy and doesn’t taste particularly good. I am now 93 percent sure that Mara was the one who went shopping, because no one else would dare to impose broccoli on me. “How

does one even . . . I could boil the broccoli, I guess? In a pot? With water?"

Ian is standing behind me, his chin on top of my head, chest hovering right behind my back. "Boil them in a pot with water," he repeats.

"I would *salt* them afterward, of course."

"You want to eat broccoli?" He sounds skeptical. Should I be offended?

No, Ian. I don't want to eat broccoli. I'm not even hungry, to be honest. But I have committed to this. I am a person who is capable of having dinner with another human. And I will prove it to you. "I could make a sandwich, then. There's lunch meat over there."

"I think those are tortilla wraps."

"No, they're— Shit. You're right."

I sigh, slam the door shut, and turn around. Ian does *not* take a step back. I have to lean against the fridge to be able to look up at him. "How do you feel about Froot Loops?"

"The cereal?"

"Yeah. Breakfast for dinner. *If* I still have milk. Let me check—"

He does not. Let me check, that is. Instead he envelops my face with his hands and leans over to me.

Our first kiss, five years ago, was all me. Me reaching out. Me initiating. Me guiding him. This one, though . . . Ian sets everything. The rhythm, the tempo, the way his tongue licks into my mouth—*everything*. It lasts for a minute, then two, then an uncountable length of time that blurs into a mess of liquid heat and trembling hands and soft, filthy noises. My arms loop around his neck. One of his legs slides between mine. I realize that this is going to end exactly like our afternoon at JPL. Both of us completely out of control, and . . .

"Stop," I say, barely breathing.

He pulls back. "Stop?" He's not breathing *at all*.

"Dinner first."

He exhales. "Really? *Now* you want dinner?"

"I promised."

"Did you?"

“Yes. I’m trying to—to show you that—”

“Hannah.” His forehead touches mine. He laughs against my mouth. “Dinner is . . . it’s symbolic. A metaphor. If you tell me that you’re willing to see where things go, I believe you, and we can—”

“No,” I say stubbornly. The urge to touch him is nearly painful. I can’t remember the last time I was this turned on. “We’re having our symbolic dinner. I’m going to show you that—what are you doing?”

He is, I believe, turning around to pluck two grapes from the same cluster I half ate this morning. He presses one against my lips till I bite into it, pops the other in his mouth. We both chew for a while, eyes locked. Though he finishes before I do, starts kissing me again, and—a mess.

We’re a *mess*.

“Done eating your dinner?” he asks against my lips. I nod. “You still hungry?” I shake my head and he picks me up and carries me to the—

“Wrong door!” I say when he tries to enter the bathroom, then the closet where I keep the vacuum cleaner I never use and the one pair of spare sheets I own, and by the time we’re on my bed we’re both laughing. Our teeth clack together when we try and fail to keep kissing as we undress each other, and I don’t think that anything has ever been like this before, intimate and sweet and so much fun at the same time.

“Just—let me—” I finish taking off his shirt and stare at his torso, mesmerized. It’s pale and broad, full of freckles and large muscles. I want to bite him and lick all over. “You’re so . . .”

He has undone my cast. He sets it aside, next to the pajama bottoms that I threw on the floor this morning, then helps me wiggle out of my jeans. “Red? And spotty?”

I laugh a little harder. “Yup.”

“That’s what I—”

I press him down till he’s lying on the bed. Then I straddle him and peel off my top, ignoring the slight sting in my ankle. This should be familiar ground to me: bodies against bodies, flesh against flesh. Just seeing what feels good and then doing more of it. It should be familiar, but I’m not sure it is. Being here with Ian is more like hearing

a song I've listened to millions of times, this time with a new arrangement.

"*God*, you look so— What works best for you?" he asks between breaths. "For your ankle?"

"Don't worry, it doesn't really hu—" I stop myself as something occurs to me. "You're right. I *am* injured."

His eyes widen. "We don't have to—"

"Which means that I should probably be in charge."

He nods. "But we don't have to—"

He shuts up the moment my hand reaches the zipper of his jeans. And he stays silent, breathing sharply, staring mesmerized at the way I undo it, slow, methodical, determined. His boxers are tented. He is hard, big. I remember touching him for the first time and thinking how good the sex was going to be.

I just didn't think it would take us five years to get there.

"Hannah," he says.

I reach inside the slit of his boxers to cup him. The second my fingers close around him, his nostrils flare. "Yes?"

"I don't think you understand how— Fuck."

He is hot and huge. Closing his eyes, arching his neck before looking at me again with a half-warning, half-pleading expression. He finds me sitting on his knees, his cock spasming in my grip as I lean over. "Hannah," he says, even deeper than usual. "What are you . . ."

I start by licking the head, thoroughly, delicately. But he feels smooth and warm against my tongue, and I immediately get impatient. I flip my hair so it's not in the way and seal my lips around him, suck gently once, twice, and then . . .

I hear a growl. Then the sound of something ripping. With the corner of my eye, I notice Ian's large hand fisting the sheet. Did he just tear my—

"Stop," he says, pleads, orders me.

My brow furrows. "You don't like it?"

"It's not—" I tighten my grip around his length, and I can almost hear his teeth grind. His cheeks are bright red. Mars Red. "We can't. Not the first time. We need to do it in a way that won't make me . . ."

I press a soft, lingering kiss at the base. He inhales once, audibly, from his nose. “So what you’re saying is . . . you don’t want to come?”

“It’s more—*shit*—about keeping my dignity,” he rushes out.

“Dignity is overrated,” I say before running my teeth up his length to take the head in my mouth again. This time, he seems to just give in. His hand slides through my hair, cups the back of my skull, and for a second he keeps me there. Pulls me closer. Presses me against him until I feel the tip of his cock hitting the back of my throat. I yield to Ian, enjoying the feeling of him losing control, the salty flavor, his trembling thighs, the helpless way he tugs at my hair to get me to take more, deeper, better—

Suddenly, it’s all upside down. I’m being dragged up his body, flipped on my back, pinned to the bed. One of his hands can hold both my wrists above my head, and when I look up I find him caging me. I first notice the panic in his eyes, then how close he was to coming, then the sheer relief that he managed to stave it off.

“Hannah,” he says. His tone is laced with command.

“What?”

His cock twitches against my abdomen. “I think I’ll be in charge now.”

I pout. “But I—”

“I’m sorry, but—it’s happening. I’m going to fuck you. I’m not going to come in your—” He doesn’t finish the sentence. Just leans forward to kiss me, and by the time he’s done, I’m nodding, breathless.

“Do you have condoms?”

“No. But I’m on the pill. We can do it without anything if you’re not giving me gross STDs. But I trust that you wouldn’t save me from the walruses just to have me die of chlamydia, so—”

I think he likes the idea of us doing it without anything. I think he loves the idea, because first he kisses me breathless, then he gets to work on taking everything—every last layer—off both of us.

The truth is, I can’t remember the last time I was fully naked with someone. When I’m having sex—the type of sex I usually go for—there always tends to be the odd irremovable layer. A bra, a tank top. Not-quite-all-the-way-off panties. My partners have been the same,

with boxers twisted at their ankles, skirts pulled up, still-cuffed open shirts.

I've never dwelled too much on the thought, but the lack of intimacy behind the encounters is crystal clear now. Now that Ian is draped over me, sucking at my breasts as if they are ripe fruits, his tongue sweet and rough against the pliant underside, alternating between too much and not enough.

He spreads my legs open with his knee, positions himself right between them, and I expect him to slide in in one smooth move. I'm certainly wet enough, and the way he grips my waist betrays his eagerness. But for long moments he just seems satisfied to nibble on my tits. Even though I can feel his erection, hot and a little wet, rubbing against the inside of my thigh whenever he shifts. It leads to me gasping and him groaning, something deep and rich rising from the pit of his chest.

"I thought you said you wanted to fuck?" I breathe out.

"I do," he rumbles. "But this . . . this is good, too."

"You can't"—a sharp intake of breath—"you can't like my tits this much, Ian."

A soft bite, right around the hard point of my nipple. My spine shoots up from the bed. "Why?"

"Because—they're . . . No one ever has." I don't want to mention that my breasts are nothing to write home about—he probably already knows, since they have been in his mouth for the better part of the last ten minutes. He seems to get it, anyway.

"You have the most perfect little tits. I always thought so. Since the first time I met you. Especially the first time I met you." He sucks on one while pinching the other. He is—precise. Good. Enthusiastic. Filthy. "They're as pretty as the Columbia Hills."

A choked laugh bubbles out of me. It's stupidly nice to have someone compare my body to a topographical feature of Mars. Or maybe it's just nice to have someone who knows the Columbia Hills tugging at my nipples and staring at them like they're the eighth and ninth wonders of the universe.

"This," he murmurs into the skin trailing up to my sternum, "this is the Medusae Fossae. It even has these pretty little freckles." His

teeth close around my right collarbone. It would be hot even if the head of his cock weren't starting to brush against my pussy. It's wetness meeting wetness, a lot of mutual eagerness, a mess waiting to happen. I band my arms around Ian's neck and pull his huge shoulders into myself, like he's the sun of my very own star system.

"Hannah. I didn't think I could want you more, but last year, when I saw you at NASA, I . . ." He is slurring his words. Ian Floyd, always calm, levelheaded, articulate. "I thought I'd die if I couldn't fuck you."

"You can fuck me now," I whine, impatient, pulling his hair as he moves lower. "You can fuck me however and wherever you want."

"I know. I know, you're going to let me do it all." He exhales a ticklish trail along my rib cage. "But maybe I want to play with the Herschel Crater first." His tongue dips inside my belly button, tasting and probing; but when I begin to squirm and pull him up, he follows meekly, as if aware that I can't take much more. Maybe he can't take much more, either: his finger parts my swollen labia to slip around my clit, a slow circle with a little too much pressure. Except that it might be just the right amount. I'm dissolving now, in a pool of coiled muscles and sticky pleasure.

Okay. So sex can be . . . this. Good to know.

"This one," Ian pants against my mouth, no pretense of kissing now. My mouth is slack with pleasure and he's just stealing air from me, sucking bee stings into my lips and groaning his approval into my cheekbone. "This one right here is the Solis Lacus. The Eye of Mars. Getting all worked up during dust storms."

He has perfect hands. Perfect touch. I will explode and scatter everywhere, a meteorite shower all over the bed.

"And the Olympus Mons." It's his palm massaging my clit now. His fingers slip into me wherever they find an opening, until the tension inside me is so sweet, I'll go insane. "I really want to come inside you. Can I?"

I shut my eyes and moan. It's a yes, and he must be able to tell. Because he grunts just as soon as the head of his cock begins to nudge inside me, a little too large for comfort, but very determined to make space for itself. I order myself to relax. And then, when he hits a perfect spot inside me, I order myself not to come immediately.

“Or maybe it’s the Vastitas Borealis.” He’s barely intelligible. Doing those little thrusts that are designed more to open me up than to fuck me properly, and yet we’re both this close to orgasm. It’s a little scary. “The oceans that used to fill it, Hannah.”

“There is no—” I try to ground myself. To find a place inside of me that is safe from the pleasure. I end up only digging my good heel into his thigh, trying to comprehend how such spectacular friction can exist. “We don’t know that there ever really was an ocean. On Mars.”

Ian’s eyes lose focus. They widen and hold mine, unseeing. And then he smiles and begins to move for real, with a little whisper in my ear.

“I bet there was.”

The pleasure crashes over me like a tidal wave. I close my eyes, hold on to him as tight as I can, and let the ocean wash over me.

Epilogue

Jet Propulsion Lab, Pasadena, California
Nine months later

The control room is silent. Unmoving. A sea of people in dark-blue polo shirts and red JPL lanyards who somehow manage to breathe in unison. Until about five minutes ago, the handful of journalists invited to document this historical event were clearing their throats, shuffling their equipment, asking the occasional whispered question. But that, too, has stopped.

Now we all wait. Silent.

". . . expect only intermittent contact at this time. A dropout as the vehicle switches antennas . . ."

I glance at Ian, who sits in the chair next to mine. He hasn't bothered to turn on his monitor. Instead, he's been watching the progress of the rover on mine, his frown deep and worried. This morning, when I straightened the collar of his shirt and told him how good he looked in blue, he didn't reply. Honestly, I don't think he even heard me. He's been very, *very* preoccupied for the past week. Which I happen to find . . . kind of cute.

"Heading directly for the target. The rover is about fifteen meters off the surface, and . . . we're getting some signals from MRO. The UHF looks good."

I reach out to brush my fingers against his under the table. It's meant to be just a fleeting, reassuring touch, but his hand closes around mine, and I decide to stay.

With Ian, I always decide to stay.

"Touchdown confirmed! Serendipity *has safely landed on the surface of Mars!"*

The room erupts into cheers. Everyone explodes out of their seats, cheering, clapping, laughing, jumping, hugging. And within the delightful, triumphant, radiant chaos of mission control, I turn to Ian, and he turns to me with the widest, most brilliant of smiles.

The following day, our kiss is on the front page of the *New York Times*.

Don't miss

Love on the Brain

coming soon from Berkley Jove!

"By the way, you can get leprosy from armadillos."

I peel my nose away from the airplane window and glance at Rocío, my research assistant. "Really?"

"Yep. They got it from humans millennia ago, and now they're giving it back to us." She shrugs. "Revenge and cold dishes and all that."

I scrutinize her beautiful face for hints that she's lying. Her large dark eyes, heavily rimmed with eyeliner, are inscrutable. Her hair is so Vantablack, it absorbs 99 percent of visible light. Her mouth is full, curved downward in its typical pout.

Nope. I got nothing. "Is this for real?"

"Would I ever lie to you?"

"Last week you swore to me that Stephen King was writing a Winnie-the-Pooh spin-off." And I believed her. Like I believed that Lady Gaga is a known satanist, or that badminton racquets are made from human bones and intestines. Chaotic goth misanthropy and creepy deadpan sarcasm are her brand, and I should know better than to take her seriously. Problem is, every once in a while she'll throw in a crazy-sounding story that upon further inspection (i.e., a Google search) is revealed to be true. For instance, did you know that the *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* was inspired by a true story? Before Rocío, I didn't. And I slept significantly better.

"Don't believe me, then." She shrugs, going back to her grad school admission prep book. "Go pet the leper armadillos and die."

She's such a weirdo. I adore her.

"Hey, you sure you're going to be fine, away from Alex for the next few months?" I feel a little guilty for taking her away from her boyfriend. When I was twenty-two, if someone had asked me to be apart from Tim for months, I'd have walked into the sea. Then again, hindsight has proven beyond doubt that I was a complete idiot, and Rocío seems pretty enthused for the opportunity. She plans to apply to Johns Hopkins's neuro program in the fall, and the NASA line on her CV won't hurt. She even hugged me when I invited her to come along—a moment of weakness I'm sure she deeply regrets.

"Fine? Are you kidding?" She looks at me like I'm insane. "Three months in Texas, do you know how many times I'll get to see La Llorona?"

"La . . . what?"

She rolls her eyes and pops in her AirPods. "You really know *nothing* about famed feminist ghosts."

I bite back a smile and turn back to the window. In 1905, Dr. Curie decided to invest her Nobel Prize money into hiring her first research assistant. I wonder if she, too, ended up working with a mildly terrifying, Cthulhu-worshipping emo girl. I stare at the clouds until I'm bored, and then I take my phone out of my pocket and connect to the complimentary in-flight Wi-Fi. I glance at Rocío, making sure that she's not paying attention to me, and angle my screen away.

I'm not a very secretive person, mostly out of laziness: I refuse to take on the cognitive labor of tracking lies and omissions. I do, however, have one secret. One single piece of information that I've never shared with anyone—not even my sister. Don't get me wrong, I trust Reike with my life, but I also know her well enough to picture the scene: she is wearing a flowy sundress and flirting with a Scottish shepherd she met in a trattoria on the Amalfi Coast. They decide to do the shrooms they just purchased from a Belarusian farmer, and mid-trip she accidentally blurts out the one thing she's been expressly forbidden to repeat: her twin sister, Bee, runs one of the most popular and controversial accounts on Academic Twitter. The Scottish shepherd's cousin is a closeted men's rights activist

who sends me a dead possum in the mail and rats me out to his insane friends, and I get fired.

No, thank you. I love my job (and possums) too much for this.

I created @WhatWouldMarieDo during my first semester of grad school. I was teaching a neuroanatomy class and decided to give my students an anonymous mid-semester survey to ask for honest feedback on how to improve the course. What I got was . . . not that. I was told that my lectures would be more interesting if I delivered them naked. That I should gain some weight, get a boob job, stop dying my hair "unnatural colors," get rid of my piercings. I was even given a phone number to call if I was "ever in the mood for a ten-inch dick." (Yeah, right.)

The messages were pretty appalling, but what sent me sobbing in a bathroom stall was the reactions of the other students in my cohort —Tim included. They laughed the comments off as harmless pranks and dissuaded me from reporting them to the department chair, telling me that I'd be making a stink about nothing.

They were, of course, all men.

(Seriously: Why *are* men?)

That night I fell asleep crying. The following day, I got up, wondered how many other women in STEM felt as alone as I did, and impulsively downloaded Twitter and made @WhatWouldMarieDo. I slapped on a poorly photoshopped pic of Dr. Curie wearing sunglasses and a one-line bio: *Making the periodic table girlier since 1889 (she/her).* I just wanted to scream into the void. I honestly didn't think that anyone would even see my first Tweet. But I was wrong.

> @WhatWouldMarieDo What would Dr. Curie, first female professor at La Sorbonne, do if one of her students asked her to deliver her lectures naked?
>
> @198888 She would shorten his half-life.
>
> @annahhhh RAT HIM OUT TO PIERRE!!!

@emily89 Put some polonium in his pants and watch his dick shrivel.

@bioworm55 Nuke him NUKE HIM

@lucyinthesea Has this happened to you? God I'm so sorry. Once a student said something about my ass and it was so gross and no one believed me.

Over half a decade later, after a handful of *Chronicle of Higher Education* nods, a *New York Times* article, and about a million followers, WWMD is my happy place. What's best is, I think the same is true for many others. The account has evolved into a therapeutic community of sorts, used by women in STEM to tell their stories, exchange advice, and . . . bitch.

Oh, we bitch. We bitch a lot, and it's glorious.

@BiologySarah Hey, @WhatWouldMarieDo if she weren't given authorship on a project that was originally her idea and that she worked on for over one year? All other authors are men, because *of course* they are.

"Yikes." I scrunch my face and quote-tweet Sarah.

Marie would slip some radium in their coffee. Also, she would consider reporting this to her institution's Office of Research Integrity, making sure to document every step of the process ♥

I hit send, drum my fingers on the armrest, and wait. My answers are not the main attraction of the account, not in the least. The real reason people reach out to WWMD is . . .

Yep. This. I feel my grin widen as the replies start coming in.

@DrAllixx This happened to me, too. I was the only woman and only POC in the author lineup and my name suddenly disappeared during revisions. DM if u want to chat, Sarah.

@AmyBernard I am a member of the Women in Science Association, and we have advice for situations like this on our

website (they're sadly common)!

@TheGeologician Going through the same situation rn @BiologySarah. I did report it to ORI and it's still unfolding but I'm happy to talk if you need to vent.

@SteveHarrison Dude, breaking news: you're lying to yourself. Your contributions aren't VALUABLE enough to warrant authorship. Your team did you a favor letting you tag along for a while but if you're not smart enough, you're OUT. Not everything is about being a woman, sometimes you're just A LOSER

It is a truth universally acknowledged that a community of women trying to mind their own business must be in want of a random man's opinion.

I've long learned that engaging with basement-dwelling STEMlords who come online looking for a fight is never a good idea—the last thing I want is to provide free entertainment for their fragile egos. If they want to blow off some steam, they can buy a gym membership or play third-person-shooter video games. Like normal people.

I make to hide @SteveHarrison's delightful contribution but notice that someone has replied to him.

@Shmacademics Yeah, Marie, sometimes you're just a loser. Steve would know.

I chuckle.

@WhatWouldMarieDo Aw, Steve. Don't be too hard on yourself.

@Shmacademics He is just a boy, standing in front of a girl, asking her to do twice as much work as he ever did in order to prove that she's worthy of becoming a scientist.

@WhatWouldMarieDo Steve, you old romantic.

@SteveHarrison Fuck you. This ridiculous push for women in STEM is ruining STEM. People should get jobs because they're

> good NOT BECAUSE THEY HAVE VAGINAS. But now people feel like they have to hire women and they get jobs over men who are MORE QUALIFIED. This is the end of STEM AND IT'S WRONG.
>
> @WhatWouldMarieDo I can see you're upset about this, Steve.
>
> @Shmacademics There, there.

Steve blocks both of us, and I chuckle again, drawing a curious glance from Rocío. @Shmacademics is another hugely popular account on Academic Twitter, and by far my favorite. He mostly tweets about how he should be writing, makes fun of elitism and ivory-tower academics, and points out bad or biased science. I was initially a bit distrustful of him—his bio says "he/him," and we all know how cis men on the internet can be. But he and I ended up forming an alliance of sorts. When the STEMlords take offense at the sheer idea of women in STEM and start pitchforking in my mentions, he helps me ridicule them a little. I'm not sure when we started direct messaging, when I stopped being afraid that he was secretly a retired Gamergater out to doxx me, or when I began considering him a friend. But a handful of years later, here we are, chatting about half a dozen different things a couple of times a week, without having even exchanged real names. Is it weird, knowing that Shmac had lice three times in second grade but not which time zone he lives in? A bit. But it's also liberating. Plus, having opinions online can be very dangerous. The internet is a sea full of creepy, cybercriminal fish, and if Mark Zuckerberg can cover his laptop webcam with a piece of tape, I reserve the right to keep things painfully anonymous.

The flight attendant offers me a glass of water from a tray. I shake my head, smile, and DM Shmac.

Marie: I think Steve doesn't want to play with us anymore.

Shmac: I think Steve wasn't held enough as a tadpole.

Marie: Lol!

Shmac: How's life?

Marie: Good! Cool new project starting next week. My ticket away from my gross boss

Shmac: I hope so. Can't believe dude's still around.

Marie: The power of connections. And inertia. What about you?
Shmac: Work's interesting.
Marie: Good interesting?
Shmac: Politicky interesting. So, no.
Marie: I'm afraid to ask. How's the rest?
Shmac: Weird.
Marie: Did your cat poop in your shoe again?
Shmac: No, but I did find a tomato in my boot the other day.
Marie: Send pics next time! What's going on?
Shmac: Nothing, really.
Marie: Oh, come on!
Shmac: How do you even know something's going on?
Marie: Your lack of exclamation points!
Shmac: !!!!!!!11!!1!!!!!
Marie: Shmac.
Shmac: FYI, I'm sighing deeply.
Marie: I bet. Tell me!
Shmac: It's a girl.
Marie: Ooooh! Tell me EVERYTHING!!!!!!!11!!1!!!!!
Shmac: There isn't much to tell.
Marie: Did you just meet her?
Shmac: No. She's someone I've known for a long time, and now she's back.
Shmac: And she is married.
Marie: To you?
Shmac: Depressingly, no.
Shmac: Sorry—we're restructuring the lab. Gotta go before someone destroys a 5 mil piece of equipment. Talk later.
Marie: Sure, but I'll want to know everything about your affair with a married woman
Shmac: I wish.

It's nice to know that Shmac is always a click away, especially now that I'm flying into the Wardass's frosty, unwelcoming lap.

I switch to my email app to check if Levi has finally answered the email I sent three days ago. It was just a couple of lines—*Hey, long time no see, I look forward to working together again, would you like*

to meet to discuss BLINK this weekend?—but he must have been too busy to reply. Or too full of contempt. Or both.

Ugh.

I lean back against the headrest and close my eyes, wondering how Dr. Curie would deal with Levi Ward. She'd probably hide some radioactive isotopes in his pockets, grab popcorn, and watch nuclear decay work its magic.

Yep, sounds about right.

After a few minutes, I fall asleep. I dream that Levi is part armadillo: his skin glows a faint, sallow green, and he's digging a tomato out of his boot with an expensive piece of equipment. Even with all of that, the weirdest thing about him is that he's finally being nice to me.

• • •

We're put up in small furnished apartments in a lodging facility just outside the Johnson Space Center, only a couple of minutes from the Sullivan Discovery Building, where we'll be working. I can't believe how short my commute is going to be.

"Bet you'll still manage to be late all the time," Rocío tells me, and I glare at her while unlocking my door. It's not my fault if I've spent a sizable chunk of my formative years in Italy, where time is but a polite suggestion.

The place is considerably nicer than the apartment I rent—maybe because of the raccoon incident, probably because I buy 90 percent of my furniture from the as-is bargain corner at Ikea. It has a balcony, a dishwasher, and—huge improvement on my quality of life—a toilet that flushes 100 percent of the times I push the lever. Truly paradigm shifting. I excitedly open and close every single cupboard (they're all empty; I'm not sure what I expected), take pictures to send Reike and my coworkers, stick my favorite Marie Curie magnet to the fridge (a picture of her holding a beaker that says "I'm pretty rad"), hang my hummingbird feeder on the balcony, and then . . .

It's still only two-thirty p.m. Ugh.

Not that I'm one of those people who hates having free time. I could easily spend five solid hours napping, rewatching an entire season of *The Office* while eating Twizzlers, or moving to step 2 of the couch-to-5K plan I'm still very . . . okay, *sort of* committed to. But I am here! In Houston! Near the Space Center! About to start the coolest project of my life!

It's Friday, and I'm not due to check in until Monday, but I'm brimming with nervous energy. So I text Rocío to ask whether she wants to check out the Space Center with me (*No*.) or to grab dinner together (*I only eat animal carcasses*.).

She's so mean. I love her.

My first impression of Houston is: big. Closely followed by: humid, and then by: humidly big. In Maryland, remnants of snow still cling to the ground, but the Space Center is already lush and green, a mix of open spaces and large buildings and old NASA aircraft on display. There are families visiting, which reminds me a little of an amusement park. I can't believe I'm going to be seeing rockets on my way to work for the next three months. It sure beats the perv crossing guard who works on the NIH campus.

The Discovery Building is on the outskirts of the center. It's wide, futuristic, and three-storied, with glass walls and a complicated-looking stair system I can't quite figure out. I step inside the marble hall, wondering if my new office will have a window. I'm not used to natural light; the sudden intake of vitamin D might kill me.

"I'm Bee Königswasser." I smile at the receptionist. "I'm starting work here on Monday, and I was wondering if I could take a look around?"

He gives me an apologetic smile. "I can't let you in if you don't have an ID badge. The engineering labs are upstairs—high-security areas."

Right. Yes. The engineering labs. Levi's labs. He's probably up there, hard at work. Engineering. Labbing. Not answering my emails.

"No problem, that's understandable. I'll just—"

"Dr. Königswasser? Bee?"

I turn around. There is a blond young man behind me. He's nonthreateningly handsome, medium height, smiling at me like we're

old friends even though he doesn't look familiar. " . . . Hi?"

"I didn't mean to eavesdrop, but I caught your name, and . . . I'm Guy. Guy Kowalsky?"

The name clicks immediately. I break into a grin. "Guy! It's so nice to meet you in person." When I was first notified of BLINK, Guy was my point of contact for logistics questions, and he and I emailed back and forth a few times. He's an astronaut—*an actual astronaut!*—working on BLINK while he's grounded. He seemed so familiar with the project, I initially assumed he'd be my co-lead.

He shakes my hand warmly. "I love your work! I've read all your articles—you'll be such an asset to the project."

"Likewise. I can't wait to collaborate."

If I weren't dehydrated from the flight, I'd probably tear up. I cannot believe that this man, this nice, pleasant man who has given me more positive interactions in one minute than Dr. Wardass did in one year, could have been my co-lead. I must have pissed off some god. Zeus? Eros? Must be Poseidon. Shouldn't have peed in the Baltic Sea during my misspent youth.

"Why don't I show you around? You can come in as my guest." He nods to the receptionist and gestures at me to follow him.

"I wouldn't want to take you away from . . . astronauting?"

"I'm between missions. Giving you a tour beats debugging any day." He shrugs, something boyishly charming about him. We'll get along great, I already know it.

"Have you lived in Houston long?" I ask as we step into the elevator.

"About eight years. Came to NASA right out of grad school. Applied for the Astronaut Corps, did the training, then a mission." I do some math in my head. It would put him in his mid-thirties, older than I initially thought. "The past two or so, I worked on BLINK's precursor. Engineering the structure of the helmet, figuring out the wireless system. But we got to a point where we needed a neurostimulation expert on board." He gives me a warm smile.

"I cannot wait to see what we cook up together." I also cannot wait to find out why Levi was given the lead of this project over someone

who has been on it for five years. It just seems unfair. To Guy *and* to me.

The elevator doors open, and he points to a quaint-looking café in the corner. “That place over there—amazing sandwiches, worst coffee in the world. You hungry?”

“No, thanks.”

“You sure? It’s on me. The egg sandwiches are almost as good as the coffee is bad.”

“I don’t really eat eggs.”

“Let me guess, a vegan?”

I nod. I try hard to break the stereotypes that plague my people and not use the word “vegan” in my first three meetings with a new acquaintance, but if they’re the ones to mention it, all bets are off.

“I should introduce you to my daughter. She recently announced that she won’t eat animal products anymore.” He sighs. “Last weekend I poured regular milk in her cereal figuring she wouldn’t know the difference. She told me that her legal team will be in touch.”

“How old is she?”

“Just turned six.”

I laugh. “Good luck with that.”

I stopped having meat at seven, when I realized that the delicious *pollo* nuggets my Sicilian grandmother served nearly every day and the cute *galline* grazing about the farm were more . . . connected than I originally suspected. Stunning plot twist, I know. Reike wasn’t nearly as distraught: when I frantically explained that “Pigs have families, too. A mom and a dad and siblings that will miss them,” she just nodded thoughtfully and said, “What you’re saying is, we should eat the whole family?” I went fully vegan a couple of years later. Meanwhile, my sister has made it her life’s goal to eat enough animal products for two. Together we emit one normal person’s carbon footprint.

“The engineering labs are down this hallway,” Guy says. The space is an interesting mix of glass and wood, and I can see inside some of the rooms. “A bit cluttered, and most people are off today—we’re shuffling around equipment and reorganizing the space. We’ve

got lots of ongoing projects, but BLINK's everyone's favorite child. The other astronauts pop by every once in a while just to ask how much longer it will be until their fancy swag is ready."

I grin. "For real?"

"Yep."

Making fancy swag for astronauts is my literal job description. I can add it to my LinkedIn profile. Not that anyone uses LinkedIn.

"The neuroscience labs—your labs—will be on the right. This way there are—" His phone rings. "Sorry—mind if I take it?"

"Not at all." I smile at his beaver phone case ("Nature's Engineer") and look away.

I wonder whether Guy would think I'm lame if I snapped a few pictures of the building for my friends. I decide that I can live with that, but when I take out my phone, I hear a noise from down the hallway. It's soft and chirpy, and sounds a lot like a . . .

"Meow."

I glance back at Guy. He's busy explaining how to put on *Moana* to someone very young, so I decide to investigate. Most of the rooms are deserted, labs full of large, abstruse equipment that looks like it belongs to . . . well. NASA. I hear male voices somewhere in the building, but no sign of the—

"Meow."

I turn around. A few feet away, staring at me with a curious expression, is a beautiful young calico.

"And who might you be?" I slowly hold out my hand. The kitten comes closer, delicately sniffs my fingers, and gives me a welcoming headbutt.

I laugh. "You're such a sweet girl." I squat down to scratch her under her chin. She nips my finger, a playful love bite. "Aren't you the most *purr*-fect little baby? I feel so *fur*-tunate to have met you."

She gives me a disdainful look and turns away. I think she understands puns.

"Come on, I was just *kitten*." Another outraged glare. Then she jumps on a nearby cart, piled ceiling-high with boxes and heavy, precarious-looking equipment. "Where are you going?"

I squint, trying to figure out where she disappeared, and that's when I realize it. The piece of equipment? The precarious-looking one? It actually *is* precarious. And the cat poked it just enough to dislodge it. And it's falling on my head.

Right.

About.

Now.

I have less than three seconds to move away. Which is too bad, because my entire body is suddenly made of stone, unresponsive to my brain's commands. I stand there, terrified, paralyzed, and close my eyes as a jumbled chaos of thoughts twists through my head. *Is the cat okay? Am I going to die? Oh God, I* am *going to die. Squashed by a tungsten anvil like Wile E. Coyote. I am a twenty-first century Pierre Curie, about to get my skull crushed by a horse-drawn cart. Except that I have no chair in the physics department of the University of Paris to leave to my lovely spouse, Marie. Except that I have barely done a tenth of all the science I meant to do. Except that I wanted so many things and I never oh my God any second now—*

Something slams into my body, shoving me aside and into the wall.

Everything is pain.

For a couple of seconds. Then the pain is over, and everything is *noise*: metal clanking as it plunges to the floor, horrified screaming, a shrill "meow" somewhere in the distance, and, closer to my ear . . . someone is panting. Less than an inch from me.

I open my eyes, gasping for breath, and . . .

Green.

All I can see is green. Not dark, like the grass outside; not dull, like the pistachios I had on the plane. This green is light, piercing, intense. Familiar, but hard to place, not unlike—

Eyes. I'm looking up into the greenest eyes I've ever seen. Eyes that I've seen before. Eyes surrounded by wavy black hair and a face that's angles and sharp edges and full lips, a face that's offensively, imperfectly handsome. A face attached to a large, solid body—a body that is pinning me to the wall, a body made of a broad chest and two thighs that could moonlight as redwoods. Easily. One

is slotted between my legs and it's holding me up. Unyielding. This man even smells like a forest—and *that mouth*. That mouth is still breathing heavily on top of me, probably from the effort of whisking me off from under seven hundred pounds of mechanical engineering tools, and—

I *know* that mouth.

Levi.

Levi.

I haven't seen Levi Ward in six years. Six blessed, blissful years. And now here he is, pushing me into a wall in the middle of NASA's Space Center, and he looks . . . he looks . . .

"Levi!" someone yells. The clanking goes silent. What was meant to fall has settled on the floor. "Are you okay?"

Levi doesn't move, nor does he look away. His mouth works, and so does his throat. His lips part to say something, but no sound comes out. Instead a hand, at once rushed and gentle, reaches up to cup my face. It's so large, I feel perfectly cradled. Engulfed in green, cozy warmth. I whimper when it leaves my skin, a plaintive, involuntary sound from deep in my throat, but I stop when I realize that it's only shifting to the back of my skull. To the hollow of my collarbone. To my brow, pushing back my hair.

It's a cautious touch. Pressing but delicate. Lingering but urgent. As though he is studying me. Trying to make sure that I'm all in one piece. Memorizing me.

I lift my eyes, and for the first time I notice the deep, unmasked concern in Levi's eyes.

His lips move, and I think that, maybe—is he mouthing my name? Once, and then again? Like it's some kind of prayer?

"Levi? Levi, is she—"

My eyelids fall closed, and everything goes dark.

Photo courtesy of the author

Ali Hazelwood is the *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Love Hypothesis*, as well as the writer of peer-reviewed articles about brain science, in which no one makes out and the ever after is not always happy. Originally from Italy, she lived in Germany and Japan before moving to the U.S. to pursue a Ph.D. in neuroscience. She recently became a professor, which absolutely terrifies her. When Ali is not at work, she can be found running, eating cake pops, or watching sci-fi movies with her two feline overlords (and her slightly-less-feline husband).

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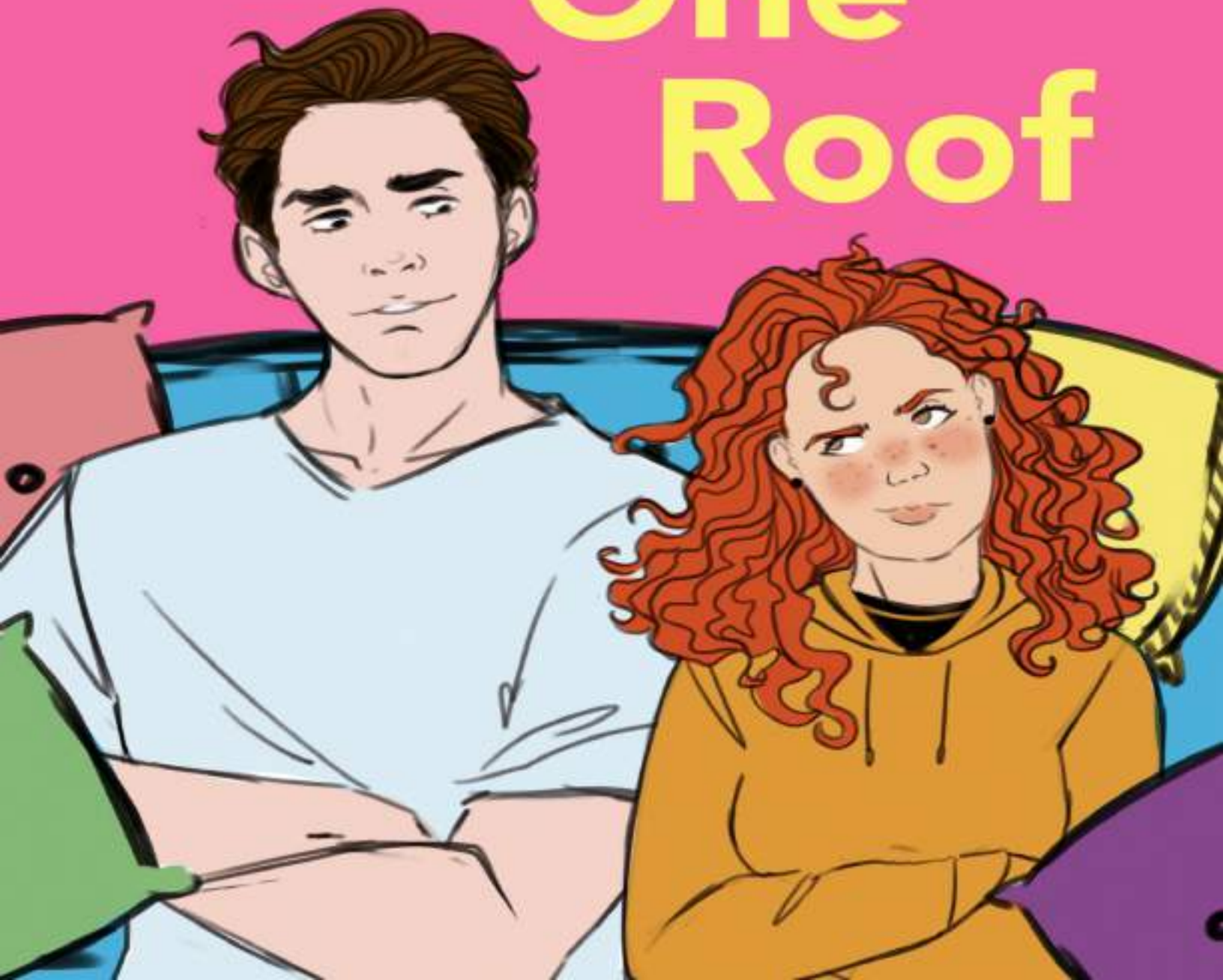
ALI HAZELWOOD

New York Times Bestselling Author
of *The Love Hypothesis*

Under
One Roof



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Titles by Ali Hazelwood

The Love Hypothesis

LOATHE TO LOVE YOU
Under One Roof
Stuck with You
Below Zero

Under One Roof

Ali Hazelwood

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For Becca, who is the best and had the best prompt.

Prologue

Present

I look at the pile of dishes in the sink and reach a painful realization: I've got it bad.

Actually, scratch that. I already knew I had it bad. But if I hadn't, this would be a dead giveaway: the fact that I cannot glance at a colander and twelve dirty forks without seeing Liam's dark eyes as he leans against the counter, arms crossed on his chest; without hearing his stern-yet-teasing voice asking me, "Postmodern installation art? Or are we just out of soap?"

It comes right on the trail of arriving home late and noticing that he left the porch light on for me. That one . . . oh, that one always makes my heart hiccup in a half-lovely, half-wrenching way. Also heart-hiccup inducing: I remember to turn it off once I'm inside. Very unlike me, and possibly a sign that the chia seed sludge he's been making me for breakfast in the mornings when I'm late for work is actually making my brain smarter.

It's good that I've decided to move out. For the best. These heart hiccups are not sustainable in the long term, not to my mental or cardiovascular health. I'm only a humble beginner at this whole pining thing, but I can safely state that living with some guy you used to hate and somehow ended up slipping in love with is *not* a wise move. Trust me, I have a doctorate.

(In a totally unrelated field, but still.)

You know what *is* good about the pining? The constant nervous energy. It has me looking at the pile of dishes and thinking that cleaning the kitchen could be a fun activity. When Liam enters the room, I'm riding the unexpected urge to load the dishwasher as far as it will carry me. I glance

up at him, notice the way he nearly fills the doorframe, and order my heart not to hiccup. It does it anyway—even adds a flip for good measure.

My heart's a jackass.

"You're probably wondering if a sniper is forcing me to do the dishes at gunpoint." I beam at Liam without really expecting him to smile back, because—Liam. He's next to impossible to read, but I've long stopped trying to *see* his amusement, and I just let myself *feel* it. It's nice, and warm, and I want to bathe in it. I want to make him shake his head, and say "Mara" in that tone of his, and laugh against his better judgment. I want to push up on my toes, reach out to fix the dark strand of hair on his forehead, burrow into his chest to smell the clean, delicious smell of his skin.

But I doubt *he* wants any of that. So I turn back to rinse a cereal bowl hiding under the colander.

"I figured you were being mind-controlled by those parasitic spores we saw on that documentary." His voice is low. Rich. I will miss it so, *so* much.

"Those were barnacles— See, I knew you fell asleep halfway." He doesn't reply. Which is fine, because—Liam. A man of few smiles and even fewer words. "So, you know the neighbors' puppy? That French bulldog? He must have gotten away during a walk, because I just saw him run toward me in the middle of the street. Leash hanging from his neck and all." I reach out for a towel and my hand bumps into him. He's standing right behind me now. "Oops. Sorry. Anyway, I carried him back home and he was so cute . . ."

I stop. Because all of a sudden Liam is not just *standing* behind me. I'm being crowded against the sink, the edge of the counter pressed into my hip bones, and there's a tall wall of heat flat against my back.

Oh my God.

Is he . . . Did he trip? He must have tripped. This is an accident.

"Liam?"

"This okay, Mara?" he asks, but he doesn't move away. He stays right where he is, front pressed against my back, hands against the counter on each side of my hips, and . . . Is this some kind of lucid dream? Is this a

heart-hiccup-generated cardiovascular event? Is my brain converting my most shameful nighttime fantasies into hallucinations?

“Liam?” I whimper, because he is nuzzling my hair. Right above my temple, with his nose and maybe even his mouth, and it seems deliberate. Very much not an accident. Is he—? No. No, surely not.

But his hands spread on my belly, and that’s what tips me off that this is different. This doesn’t feel like one of those accidental brushing of arms in the hallway, the ones I’ve been telling myself to stop obsessing over. It doesn’t feel like that time I tripped over my computer cord and almost stumbled into his lap, and it doesn’t feel like him gently holding my wrist to check how badly I burned my thumb while cooking on the stove. This feels . . . “Liam?”

“Shh.” I feel his lips at my temple, warm and reassuring. “Everything’s okay, Mara.”

Something hot and liquid begins to coil at the bottom of my belly.

Chapter 1

Six months ago

"Frankly, *They get on like a house on fire* is the most misleading saying in the English language. Faulty wiring? Misuse of heating equipment? Suspected arson? *Not* evocative of two people getting along in the least. You know what a house on fire has me picturing? Bazookas. Flamethrowers. Sirens in the distance. Because nothing is more guaranteed to start a house fire than two enemies blowtorching each other's most prized possession. Want to trigger an explosion? Being nice to your roommate is not going to do it. Lighting a match on top of their kerosene-soaked handmade quilt, on the other hand—"

"Miss?" The Uber driver turns, looking guilty about interrupting my pre-apocalyptic spiel. "Just a heads-up—we're about five minutes from your destination."

I smile an apologetic *Thank you* and glance back at my phone. My two best friends' faces take up the entire screen. Then, on the upper corner there's me: more frowny than usual (well justified), more pasty than usual (is that even possible?), more ginger than usual (must be the filter, right?).

"That's a totally fair take, Mara," Sadie says with a puzzled expression, "and I encourage you to submit your, um, very valid complaints to Madame Merriam-Webster or whoever's in charge of these matters, but . . . I literally only asked you how the funeral went."

"Yes, Mara—how'd—funeral—go—?" The quality on Hannah's end of the call is pitiful, but that's business as usual.

This, I suppose, is what happens when you meet your best friends in grad school: One minute you're happy as a clam, clutching your shiny

brand-new engineering diploma, giggling your way through a fifth round of Midori sours. The next you're in tears, because you're all going separate ways. FaceTime becomes as necessary as oxygen. There are zero neon-green cocktails in sight. Your slightly deranged monologues don't happen in the privacy of the apartment you share, but in the semipublic backseat of an Uber, while you're on your way to have a very, *very* weird conversation.

See, that's the thing I hate the most about adulting: at some point, one has to start doing it. Sadie is designing fancy eco-sustainable buildings in New York City. Hannah is freezing her butt off at some Arctic research station NASA put up in Norway. And as for me . . .

I'm here. Moving to D.C. to start my dream job—scientist at the Environmental Protection Agency. On paper, I should be over the moon. But paper burns *so* fast. As fast as houses on fire.

"Helena's funeral was . . . interesting." I lean back against the seat. "I guess that's the upside of knowing that you're about to die. You get to bully people a bit. Tell them that if they don't play 'Karma Chameleon' while lowering your casket your ghost will haunt their progeny for generations."

"I'm just glad you guys were able to be with her in the last few days," Sadie says.

I smile wistfully. "She was the worst till the very end. She cheated in our last chess game. As if she wouldn't have beaten me anyway." I miss her. An inordinate amount. Helena Harding, my Ph.D. advisor and mentor for the past eight years, was family in a way my cold, distant blood relatives never cared to be. But she was also elderly, in a lot of pain, and, as she liked to put it, *eager to move on to bigger projects*.

"It was so lovely of her to leave you her D.C. house," Hannah says. She must have moved to a better fjord, because I can actually make out her words. "Now you'll have a place to be, no matter what."

It's true. It's all true, and I am immensely grateful. Helena's gift was as generous as it was unexpected, easily the kindest thing anyone has ever done for me. But the reading of the will was a week ago, and there's something I haven't had a chance to tell my friends. Something closely related to houses on fire. "About that . . ."

“Uh-oh.” Two sets of brows furrow. “What happened?”

“It’s . . . complicated.”

“I *love* complicated,” Sadie says. “Is it also dramatic? Let me go get tissues.”

“Not sure, yet.” I take a fortifying breath. “The house Helena left me, as it turns out, she didn’t really . . . own it.”

“What?” Sadie aborts the tissue mission to frown at me.

“Well, she did own it. But only a little. Only . . . half.”

“And who owns the *other* half?” Trust Hannah to zoom in on the crux of the problem.

“Originally, Helena’s brother, who died and left it to his kids. Then the youngest son bought out the others, and now he’s the sole owner. Well, with me.” I clear my throat. “His name is Liam. Liam Harding. He’s a lawyer in his early thirties. And he currently lives in the house. Alone.”

Sadie’s eyes widen. “Holy shit. Did Helena know?”

“I have no clue. You’d assume, but the Hardings are such a weird family.” I shrug. “Old money. Lots of it. Think Vanderbilts. Kennedys. What even goes on in rich people’s brains?”

“Probably monocles,” Hannah says.

I nod. “Or topiary gardens.”

“Cocaine.”

“Polo tournaments.”

“Cuff links.”

“Hang on,” Sadie interrupts us. “What did Liam Vanderbilt Kennedy Harding say about this at the funeral?”

“Excellent question, but: he wasn’t there.”

“He didn’t show up to *his aunt’s funeral*?”

“He doesn’t really keep in touch with his family. Lots of drama, I suspect.” I tap my chin. “Maybe they’re less Vanderbilts, more Kardashians?”

“Are you saying that he doesn’t know that you own the other half of his house?”

“Someone gave me his number and I told him I’d be coming around.” I pause before adding, “Via text. We haven’t talked yet.” Another pause. “And he didn’t really . . . reply.”

“I don’t like this,” Sadie and Hannah say in unison. Any other time I’d laugh about their hive mind, but there’s something else I still haven’t told them. Something they’ll like even less.

“Fun fact about Liam Harding . . . You know how Helena was like, the Oprah of environmental science?” I chew on my lower lip. “And she always joked that her entire family was mostly liberal-leaning academics out to save the world from the clutches of big corporations?”

“Yeah?”

“Her nephew is a corporate lawyer for FGP Corp.” Just saying the words makes me want to gargle with mouthwash. And floss. My dentist will be thrilled.

“FGP Corp—the fossil fuels people?” A deep line appears in the middle of Sadie’s brow. “Big oil? Supermajors?”

“Yep.”

“Oh my *God*. Does he know you’re an environmental scientist?”

“Well, I did give him my name. And my LinkedIn profile is just a Google search away. Do rich people use LinkedIn, you think?”

“No one uses LinkedIn, Mara.” Sadie rubs her temple. “Jesus Christ, this is really bad.”

“It’s not that bad.”

“You can’t go meet with him alone.”

“I’ll be fine.”

“He’ll kill you. You’ll kill him. You’ll kill each other.”

“I . . . maybe?” I close my eyes and lean back against the seat. I’ve been talking myself out of panicking for seventy-two hours—with mixed results. I can’t crack now. “Believe me, he’s the last person I want to co-own a house with. But Helena did leave half of it to me, and I kind of need it? I owe a billion in student loans, and D.C. is crazy expensive. Maybe I can stay there for a bit? Save on rent. It’s a fiscally responsible decision, no?”

Sadie facepalms just as Hannah says combatively, “Mara, you were a grad student until ten minutes ago. You’re barely above the poverty line. Do *not* let him kick you out of that house.”

“Maybe he won’t even mind! I’m actually very surprised he lives there. Don’t get me wrong, the house is nice, but . . .” I trail off, thinking about the pictures I’ve seen, the hours spent on Google Street View scrolling and rescrolling through the frames, trying to get a grip on the fact that Helena cared about me enough to *leave me a house*. It’s a beautiful property, certainly. But more of a family residence. Not what I’d expect from an ace lawyer who probably earns a European country’s annual GDP per billable hour. “Don’t high-powered attorneys live in luxury fifty-ninth-floor penthouses with golden bidets and brandy cellars and statues of themselves? For all I know he barely spends time in the house. So I’m just going to be honest with him. Explain my situation. I’m sure we can find some kind of solution that—”

“Here we are,” the driver tells me with a smile. I return it, a tad weakly.

“If you don’t text us within half an hour,” Hannah says in a dead-serious tone, “I’m going to assume that Big Oil Liam is holding you captive in his basement and call law enforcement.”

“Oh, don’t worry about that. Remember that kickboxing class I took in our third year? And that time at the strawberry festival, when I kicked the butt of the guy who tried to steal your pie?”

“He was an eight-year-old boy, Mara. And you did *not* kick his butt—you gave him your own pie and a kiss on the forehead. Text in thirty, or I’m calling the cops.”

I glare at her. “Assuming a polar bear hasn’t mugged you in the meantime.”

“Sadie’s in New York, and she has the D.C. police on speed dial.”

“Yup.” Sadie nods. “Setting it up right now.”

I start feeling nervous the moment I exit the car, and it gets worse the farther I drag my suitcase up the path—a heavy ball of anxiety slowly nestling behind my sternum. I stop about halfway to take a deep breath. I blame Hannah and Sadie, who worry way too much and are apparently

contagious. I'll be fine. This will be fine. Liam Harding and I will have a nice, calm chat and figure out the best possible solution that is satisfactory to . . .

I take in the early-fall yard around me, and my trail of thought fades away.

It's a simple house. Large, but no topiary shit or rococo gazebos or those creepy gnomes. Just a well-kept lawn with the occasional landscaped corner, a handful of trees I don't recognize, and a large wooden patio furnished with comfortable-looking pieces. In the late-afternoon sunlight, the red bricks give the house a cozy, homey appearance. And every square inch of the place seems dusted in the warm yellow of ginkgo leaves.

I inhale the smell of grass, and bark, and sun, and when my lungs are full I let out a soft laugh. I could so easily fall in love with this place. Is it possible that I already am? My very first love at first sight?

Maybe this is why Helena left the house to me, because she knew I'd form an immediate connection. Or maybe knowing that she wanted me here has me ready to open my heart to it. Either way, it doesn't matter: this place feels like it could be home, and Helena is once again being her meddling self, this time from the afterlife. After all, she always went on and on about how she wanted me to really belong. *"You know, Mara, I can tell you're lonely,"* she'd say whenever I stopped by her office to chat. *"How do you even know?" "Because people who aren't lonely don't write fanfiction for* The Bachelor *franchise in their spare time." "It's not fanfiction. More of a metacommentary on the epistemological themes that arise in each episode and—my blog has* plenty *of readers!" "Listen, you're a brilliant young woman. And everyone loves redheads. Why don't you just date one of the nerds in your cohort? Ideally the one who doesn't smell like compost." "Because they're all dicks who keep asking when I'll drop out to go get a degree in home economics?" "Mmm. That* is *a good reason."*

Maybe Helena finally realized that any hope of me settling down with *someone* was a lost cause, and decided to channel her efforts into me settling down *somewhere*. I can almost picture her, cackling like a satisfied hag, and it makes me miss her a million times harder.

Feeling much better, I leave my suitcase just off the porch (no one is going to steal it, not covered as it is in geeky KEEP CALM AND RECYCLE ON, and GOOD PLANETS ARE HARD TO FIND, and TRUST ME, I'M AN ENVIRONMENTAL ENGINEER stickers). I run a hand through my long curls, hoping it's not too messy (it probably is). I remind myself that Liam Harding is unlikely to be a threat—just a rich, spoiled man-boy with the depth of a surfboard who cannot intimidate me—and lift my arm to ring the bell. Except that the door swings open before I can get to it, and I find myself standing in front of . . .

A chest.

A broad, well-defined chest under a button-down. And a tie. And a dark suit jacket.

The chest is attached to other body parts, but it's so wide that for a moment it's all I can see. Then I manage to shift my gaze and finally notice the rest: Long, well-muscled legs filling what's left of the suit. Shoulders and arms stretching for miles. A square jaw and full lips. Short dark hair, and a pair of eyes barely a shade darker.

They are, I realize, fixed on me. Studying me with the same avid, confused interest I'm experiencing. The man appears to be unable to look away, as if spellbound at some base, deeply physical level. Which is a relief, because I can't look away, either. I don't want to.

It's like a punch to my solar plexus, how attractive I find him. It addles my brain and makes me forget that I'm standing right in front of a stranger. That I should probably say something. That the heat I'm feeling is probably inappropriate.

He clears his throat, looking as flustered as I feel.

I smile. "Hi," I say, a little breathless.

"Hi." He sounds the exact same. He wets his lips, as though his mouth is suddenly dry, and *wow*. That's a good look for him. "Can I . . . Can I help you?" His voice is beautiful. Deep. Rich. A little hoarse. I could marry this voice. I could roll around in this voice. I could listen to this voice forever and give up every other sound. But maybe I should first answer the question.

"Do you, um, live here?"

“I think so,” he says, as though too wonderstruck to remember. Which makes me laugh.

“Great. I am here for . . .” What am I here for? Ah. Yes. “I was looking for, um, Liam. Liam Harding. Do you know where I can find him?”

“It’s me. I’m he.” He clears his throat again. Is he flushing? “That is, I am Liam.”

“Oh.” Oh no. Oh *no*. No, no. No. “I’m Mara. Mara Floyd. The . . . Helena’s friend. I’m here about the house.”

Liam’s demeanor changes *instantly*.

He briefly closes his eyes, like one would when given a tragic, insurmountable piece of news. For a moment he looks betrayed, as though someone gave him a precious gift only to steal it from his hands the second it was unwrapped. When he says, “It’s you,” there is a bitter tinge to his beautiful voice.

He turns around and begins to stalk down the hallway. I hesitate for a moment, wondering what to do. He didn’t close the door, so he wants me to follow him. Right? No clue. Either way, I half own the house, so I’m probably not trespassing? I shrug and hurry after him, trying to keep up with his much longer legs, taking in next to nothing of my surroundings until we reach a living area.

Which is stunning. This house is all large windows and hardwood floors —oh my God, is that a *fireplace*? I want to make s’mores in it. I want to roast an entire piglet. With an apple in its mouth.

“I’m so glad we can finally talk face-to-face,” I tell Liam, a little out of breath. I’m finally recovering from . . . whatever happened at the door. I fidget with the bracelet on my wrist, watching him write something on a piece of paper. “I am so sorry for your loss. Your aunt was my favorite person in the whole world. I’m not sure why she decided to leave me the house, and I do understand that this co-owning business comes a bit out of left field, but . . .”

I trail off when he folds the paper and hands it to me. He’s so tall, I have to consciously lift up my chin to meet his eyes. “What is this?” I don’t wait for his answer and unfold it.

There’s a number written on it. A number with zeros. Lots of them. I look up, confused. “What does this mean?”

He holds my gaze. There is no trace of the flustered, hesitant man who greeted me a few moments earlier. This version of Liam is coldly handsome and self-assured. “Money.”

“Money?”

He nods.

“I don’t understand.”

“For your half of the house,” he says impatiently, and it suddenly dawns on me: he is trying to buy me out.

I look down at the paper. This is more money than I’ve ever had in my life—or ever will. Environmental engineering? Not a lucrative career choice, apparently. And I don’t know much about real estate, but my guess is that this sum is *way* above the actual value of the house. “I’m sorry. I think there’s a misunderstanding. I’m not going to—I don’t—” I take a deep breath. “I don’t think I want to sell.”

Liam stares, expressionless. “You don’t *think*?”

“I *don’t*. Want to sell, that is.”

He nods once, curtly. And then asks, “How much more?”

“What?”

“How much more do you want?”

“No, I—I’m not interested in selling the house,” I repeat. “I just can’t. Helena—”

“Is double enough?”

“*Double*—how do you *even*—do you have *corpses* buried under the flower beds?”

His eyes are blocks of ice. “How much more?”

Is he even listening to me? Why is he being so insistent? Where has his cute, boyish blush gone? At the door, he just seemed so . . .

Whatever. I was clearly wrong. “I just can’t sell. I’m sorry. But maybe we can figure out something else in the next few days? I don’t have a place to stay in D.C., so I was thinking of moving in for a little while . . .”

He exhales a silent laugh. Then he realizes that I'm serious, and shakes his head. "No."

"Well." I try to be reasonable. "The house seems large, and—"

"You're not moving in."

I take a deep breath. "I understand. But my financial situation is very precarious. I'm starting my new job in two days, and it's really close by. On foot. This is a perfect place for me to live for a little while, until I get back on my feet."

"I just handed you the solution to all of your financial problems."

I wince. "It's really not that simple." Or maybe it is. I don't know, because I just can't stop remembering the ginkgo leaves settling on the hydrangeas and wondering what they would look like in the spring. Maybe Helena would have wanted me to see the yard in every season. If she'd meant for me to sell, she would have left me a chunk of cash. Right? "There are reasons why I'd prefer not to sell. But we can work out a solution. For instance, I could, um, temporarily rent you my half of the house and use the money to stay in another place?" That way, I'd still be holding on to Helena's gift. I'd be out of Liam's way and above the destitution threshold. Well, *slightly* above. And in the future, once Liam gets married to his girlfriend (who's probably a Fortune 500 CEO who can list the Dow 30 by market cap and has a favorite item in the *goop* newsletter), moves to a McMansion in Potomac, MD, and starts a politico-economic dynasty, I could revisit this place. Move in, like Helena seems to have wanted. If by then I've gotten a raise and can cover the water bill on my own, that is.

It's a fair proposal, right? Wrong. Because Liam's response is:

"No." Boy, he loves the word.

"But why? you clearly have the money—"

"I want this settled once and for all. Who is your attorney?"

I'm about to laugh in his face and crack a joke about my "legal team" when his iPhone rings. He checks the caller ID and swears softly under his breath. "I need to take this. Stay put," he orders, way too bossy for my taste. Before he steps out of the living room he pins me with his cold, stern eyes and repeats once more, "This is not, and will *never* be your house."

And that, I believe, is it.

It’s that very last sentence that clinches it. Well, together with the condescending, domineering, arrogant way he talked to me in the past two minutes. I walked into this house fully ready to have a productive conversation. I gave him several options, but he shut me down and now I’m getting *pissed*. I have as much legal right as he does to be here, and if he refuses to acknowledge it . . .

Well. Too bad for him.

Anger bubbling up my throat, I tear the paper Liam gave me in four pieces and drop it on the coffee table for him to find later. Then I go back to the porch, retrieve my suitcase, and start looking for an unused bedroom.

`Guess what?` I text Sadie and Hannah. `Mara Floyd, Ph.D., just moved into her new house. And it’s most definitely on fire.`

Chapter 2

Five months, two weeks ago

I don’t have time for this.

I am late for work. I have a meeting in half an hour. I have yet to brush my teeth *and* my hair.

I *really* don’t have time for this.

And yet, like the fool that I have grown to be, I give in to temptation. I slam the fridge door, turn around to lean against it, cross my arms as menacingly as I can, and I stare at Liam across the expanse of the open-concept kitchen.

“I know you have been using my coffee creamer.”

It’s wasted energy. Because Liam just stands on the side of the island, as impassible as the granite of the countertop, calmly spreading butter on a piece of toast. He doesn’t fight back. He doesn’t look at me. He proceeds with his buttering, unbothered, and asks, “Have I?”

“You’re not as stealthy as you think, buddy.” I give him my best glare. “And if this is some kind of intimidation tactic, it’s not working.”

He nods. Still unbothered. “Have you informed the police?”

“What?”

He shrugs his stupid, broad shoulders. He is wearing a suit, because he is *always* wearing a suit. A charcoal three-piece that fits him perfectly—and yet not at all, because he really doesn’t have the evil-corporate-businessman physique. Maybe during his mandatory Kill the Earth training he interned as an oil rig driller? “This alleged theft of coffee creamer appears to distress you a lot. Have you told law enforcement?”

Deep breaths. I need to take deep breaths. In D.C., murder can be punished with up to thirty years in prison. I know, because I looked it up the day after I moved in. Then again, a jury of my peers would never convict me—not if I laid out the horrors I've been subjected to in the past few weeks. They would surely rule Liam's death as self-defense. They might even give me a trophy. "Liam, I'm trying here. *Really* trying to make this work. Do you ever stop and wonder if maybe *you* are being an asshole?"

This time he does look up. His eyes are so cold, my entire body shivers. "I did try. Once. And right when I was on the verge of a breakthrough someone started blasting the *Frozen* soundtrack at full volume."

I flush. "I was cleaning my room. I had no idea you were home."

"Mmm." He nods, and then does something I did not expect: he comes closer. He takes a few leisurely steps, making his way through the beautiful mix of ultramodern appliances and classic furniture of the kitchen until he's towering over me. Staring down as though I'm an ant problem he thought he'd long gotten rid of. He smells like shampoo and expensive fabric, and he's still holding the butter knife. Can you stab someone with that? I don't know, but Liam Harding looks like he'd be able to murder someone (i.e., me) with a beach ball. "Isn't your emotional-support creamer bad for the environment, Mara?" he asks, voice low and deep. "Think of the impact of ultraprocessed foods. The toxic ingredients. All that plastic."

He is so condescending, I could bite him. Instead I square my shoulders and step even closer. "I do something you've probably never heard of—it's called *recycling*."

"Is that so?" He sets the knife on the counter and glances next to me, at the bins I installed after I moved in. They are overflowing, but only because I've been too busy to bring them to the center. And he *knows* it.

"There's no pickup in the neighborhood. But I plan to drive to the—What are you . . ." Liam's hands close around my waist, his fingers so long, they meet both on my back *and* above my belly button. My brain stutters to a stop. What the hell is he—?

He lifts me up till I'm hovering above the floor, then effortlessly moves me a few inches to the side of the refrigerator. Like I'm as light as an

Amazon delivery box, the giant ones that for some reason have only a single stick of deodorant packed inside. I sputter as indignantly as I can, but he doesn't pay any attention to me. Instead he sets me on my feet, opens the fridge, grabs a jar of raspberry compote, and murmurs, "Then you better get to it," with one last long, intense look.

He goes back to his toast, and I go back to not existing in his universe.

Lovely.

I growl my way out of the room, half flustered and all homicidal, still feeling the heels of his palms pressing into my skin. *In his sleep. I swear I'm going to kill him in his damn sleep. When he least expects it. And then I'll celebrate by throwing empty bottles of creamer at his corpse.*

Ten minutes later I am rage-sweating, walking to work while on an emergency venting-videocall (ventocall) with Sadie. There have been a lot of those in the past few weeks. *A lot*.

". . . he doesn't even drink coffee. Which means that he's either flushing creamer down the toilet to spite me or chugging it down like it's water—and I honestly don't know which scenario would be worse, because on the one hand, one serving is like, six hundred and forty calories and Liam still manages to only have three percent body fat, but on the other, taking time out of his busy schedule to deprive *me* of *my* creamer is a gesture of unprecedented cruelty that no one should ever . . ." I trail off when I notice her bemused expression. "What?"

"Nothing."

I squint. "Are you looking at me weird?"

"No! Nope." She shakes her head emphatically. "It's just . . ."

"Just?"

"You've been talking about Liam nonstop for"—she lifts one eyebrow—"eight minutes straight, Mara."

My cheeks burn. "I'm so sorry, I—"

"Don't get me wrong, I *love* this. Listening to you bitch is my jam, ten out of ten, would recommend. I just feel like I've never seen you like this, you know? We lived together for five years. You're usually all about compromise and harmony and *Imagine all the people*."

I *try* not to live my life in a perennial state of flame-throwing anger. My parents were the kind of people who probably should not have had kids: checked out, not affectionate, impatient for me to move out so they could turn my childhood bedroom into a shoe closet. I know how to cohabitate with others and minimize conflict, because I've been doing it since I was seventeen—ten years ago. *Live and let live* is a crucial skill set in any shared living space, and I had to master it quickly. And I still have it mastered. I really do. I'm just not sure I *want* to let Liam Harding live.

"I'm trying, Sadie, but I'm not the one who keeps lowering the damn thermostat to freezing. Who doesn't bother turning off the lights before going out—our electricity bill is *insane*. Two days ago, I got home after work, and the only person in the house was some random guy sitting on my couch who offered me my own Cheez-Its. I thought he was a hitman Liam had hired to kill me!"

"Oh my God. Was he?"

"No. He was Calvin—Liam's friend, who's tragically a million times nicer than him. The point is, Liam's the kind of shit roommate who invites people over when he's not home, without telling you. Also, why the hell can't he say hi when he sees me? And is he psychologically unable to close the cupboards? Does he have some deep-rooted trauma that drove him to decorate the house exclusively with black-and-white prints of trees? Is he aware that he doesn't have to slam the door every time he goes out? And does he absolutely need to have his stupid dudebro friends come over every weekend to play video games in the—" I finish crossing the street and look at the screen. Sadie is chewing on her bottom lip, pensive. "What's going on?"

"You were going off and didn't really seem to need me, so I did a thing."

"A thing?"

"I googled Liam."

"What? Why?"

"Because I like to put a face to people I talk about for several hours a week."

“Whatever you do, do *not* click on his page on the FGP Corp website. Do not give them the hits!”

“Too late. He actually looks . . .”

“Like global warming and capitalism had a love child who’s going through a bodybuilding phase.”

“Um . . . I was going to say cute.”

I huff. “When I look at him all I can see are all the creamer-less cups of coffee I’ve been drinking since the day I moved in.” And maybe sometimes, just sometimes, I remembered that flustered, wonderstruck look he gave me before he knew who I was. Mourn it a little. But who am I kidding? I must have hallucinated it.

“Has he offered to buy you out again?” Sadie asks.

“He doesn’t really acknowledge my existence. Well, except to occasionally stare like I’m some roach infesting his pristine living space. But his lawyer sends me emails with ridiculous buyout offers every other day.” I can see my work building, a hundred feet away. “But I won’t. I’ll keep the one thing Helena left me. And once I’m in a better place financially I’ll just move out. It shouldn’t take too long, a few months at the most. And in the meantime . . .”

“Black coffee?”

I sigh. “In the meantime I drink bitter, disgusting coffee.”

Chapter 3

Five months, one week ago

Dear Helena,

This is weird.

Is this weird?

This is probably weird.

I mean, you're dead. And I'm here, writing you a letter. When I'm not even sure I believe in the afterlife. Truth be told, I stopped pondering eschatological matters in high school because they got me anxious and made me break out in hives under my left armpit (never the right; what's up with that?). And it's not like I'm ever going to figure out a mystery that eluded great thinkers like Foucault or Derrida or that unspellable German dude with bushy sideburns and syphilis.

But I digress.

You've been gone for over a month, and things are same old, same old. Humanity is still in the clutches of capitalist cabals; we have yet to figure out a way to slow down the impending catastrophe that is anthropogenic climate change; I wear my "Save the Bees & Tax the Rich" T-shirt whenever I go for a run. The usual. I do love the work I'm doing at the EPA (thank you so much for that rec letter, by the way; I'm very grateful you didn't mention that time you bailed Sadie, Hannah, and me out of jail after that anti-dam protest. The U.S. government would not *have liked that one). There* is *the small issue that I'm the only woman in a team of six, and that the dudes I*

work with seem to believe that my squishy female brain is unable to grasp sophisticated concepts like . . . the sphericity of the Earth, I guess? The other day Sean, my team leader, spent thirty minutes explaining the contents of my own dissertation to me. I had very vivid fantasies about clocking him in the head and tiling his cadaver under my bathtub, but you probably already know all of this. You probably just sit around on a cloud all day being omniscient. Eating Triscuits. Occasionally playing the harp. You lazy bum.

I think the reason I'm writing this letter that you will never, ever read is that I wish I could talk to you. If my life were a movie, I'd trudge to your tombstone and bare my heart while a public-domain symphony in D minor plays in the background. But you were buried in California (inconvenient, much?) which makes letter writing the only feasible option.

All of this is to say: First, I miss you. A lot. A fucking huge lot. How could you leave me here without you? Shame, Helena. Shame.

Second: I am so, so grateful you left me this home. It's the best, coziest place I've ever lived in, hands down. I've been spending my weekends reading in the sunroom. Honestly, I never thought I'd set foot in a house with a foyer without being escorted off the premises by security. I just . . . I've never had a place that was mine, before. A place that's going to be there no matter what. A safe harbor, if you will. I feel your presence when I'm home, even if the last time you set foot here was probably in the '70s on your way back from a women's liberation march. And don't worry, I fondly remember your hatred of cheesy and I can almost hear you say, Cut this shit out. *So I will.*

Third, and this is less of a statement and more of a question: Would you mind it if I killed your nephew? Because I am very close to it. Like—sooo close. I am basically stabbing him with a potato peeler as we speak. Though it occurs to me now that maybe it's exactly what you wanted. You never mentioned Liam in all the years I knew you, after all. And he does work for a company whose main product is greenhouse gases, so maybe you hated him? Maybe our

entire friendship was a long con that you knew would end in me pouring brake fluid in the tea of your least favorite relative. In which case, well done. And I hate you.

I could give a comprehensive list of his horribleness (I curate one in my Notes app) but I like to inflict it upon Sadie and Hannah via Zoom. I just . . . I guess I wish I understood why you put me in the path of one of the asswipiest asswipes in the country. In the world. In the entire damn Milky Way. Just the way he looks at me—the way he doesn't *look at me. He clearly thinks he's above me, and—*

The doorbell rings. I stop midsentence and run to the entrance. Which takes me like, two whole minutes, proving my point that this house is plenty large for two people.

I wish I could say that Liam Harding has shit taste in home decor. That he abuses inspirational-quotes decals, buys plastic fruit at Ikea, sticks neon bar lights everywhere. Sadly, either he knows how to put together a pretty nice house interior, or his FPG Corp blood money paid to hire someone who does. The place is an elegant combination of traditional and modern pieces; I'm almost certain that whoever furnished it can correctly use the word *palette* in a sentence, and that the way the deep reds, forest greens, and soft grays complement the hardwood floors is a little more than accidental. And there's the fact that everywhere looks so . . . simple. With a home as large as this one, I'd be tempted to stuff every room with tables and sideboards and rugs, but Liam somehow limited himself to bare necessities. Couches, a few comfortable chairs, shelves full of books. That's it. The house is airy, full of light, sparsely decorated in warm tones, and all the more beautiful for it. "Minimalist," Sadie told me when I gave her a video tour. "Really well done, too." I believe my response was a snarl.

And then there's the art on the walls, which is unwelcomely growing on me. Pictures of lakes at sunrise and waterfalls at sunset, thick woods and lone trees, frozen grounds and blooming fields. The occasional wild animal going about its day, always in black and white. I don't know why, but I've been catching myself staring at them. The framing is simple, the subject

mundane, but there's something about them. Like whoever took those photos really connected with the settings. Like they tried to truly capture them, to take home a piece of them.

I wonder who the photographer is, but I can find no signature. It's probably some starving Georgetown MFA grad, anyway. They poured their soul into the series hoping it'll be bought by someone who appreciates art, and instead here it is. Owned by a total ass. I bet Liam didn't even choose them. I bet they were just a tax-deductible purchase for him. Maybe he figured that in the long run a nice collection is as good as stock dividends.

"I'll need a signature," the UPS guy tells me when I open the door. He's chewing bubblegum and looks about fifteen. I feel decrepit inside. "You're not William K. Harding, are you?"

William K. It's almost cute. I hate it. "Nope."

"Is he home?"

"No." Mercifully.

"Is he your husband?"

I laugh. Then I laugh some more. Then I realize that the UPS guy is squinting at me like I'm the Wicked Witch of the West. "Um, no. Sorry. He's my . . . roommate."

"Right. Can you sign for your roomie?"

"Sure." I reach for the pen, but my hand stills in midair when I notice the FGP Corp insignia on the envelope.

I hate them. Even more than I hate Liam. Not only does he make me miserable at home mowing the lawn at seven thirty A.M. on the one day of the week I can sleep in, but he adds insult to injury by working for one of my professional nemeses. FGP Corp is one of those huge conglomerates that keep on causing environmental messes—a bunch of overeducated dudes in $7K suits who disseminate biotoxins around the world with utter disregard for the brown pelicans (and the entire future of humanity, but I'm personally more attached to the pelicans, who did *nothing* to deserve this).

I glare at the thick bubble mailer. Would Liam sign for an EPA envelope on my behalf? I doubt it. Or maybe he would. Then he'd tie it to red balloons his buddy Pennywise provided and watch it disappear into the

sunset. I'm already 73 percent certain that he's been hiding my socks. I'm down to four matching pairs, for crisp's sake.

"Actually." I take a step back, smiling, reveling in my own pettiness. *Helena, you'd be so proud.* "I probably shouldn't sign for him. I bet it's a federal crime or something."

The UPS guy shakes his head. "It's really not."

I shrug. "Who's to say?"

"Me. It's literally my job."

"Which you are performing admirably." I beam. "But I still won't sign for the envelope. Would you like a cup of tea? A glass of wine? Cheez-Its?"

He frowns. "You sure you won't? This is express shipping. Someone paid a lot of money for same-day delivery. It's probably really urgent shit that William K. will need as soon as he gets home."

"Right. Well, that sounds like a William K. problem."

He whistles. "That's *cold*." He sounds admiring. Or just scared. "So, what's wrong with poor William K.? Does he leave the toilet seat up?"

"We have separate bathrooms." I mull it over. "But I'm sure he does. In the very remote possibility I end up using his."

He nods. "You know, when my sister was in college she used to have a roommate she hated. I'm talking warfare. They'd yell at each other the entire time. She once wrote an entire list of everything she hated about him on her phone and it crashed her Reminders app. It was *that* long."

Uh-oh. That sounds familiar. "What happened to her?"

I cross my fingers that the answer won't be *She's serving a lifetime sentence at a nearby correctional facility for shaving off his hair while he was sleeping and tattooing "I'm a bad person" on his scalp.* And yet, what UPS guy ends up saying is ten times more disturbing.

"They're getting married next June." He shakes his head and turns around with a wave of his hand. "Go figure."

* * *

I'm dreaming of a concert—a bad one.

More noise than music, really. The kind of '70s German electronic crap that Liam owns in vinyl form and will sometimes play when one of his friends comes over to play first-person shooter video games. It's loud and obnoxious and irritating, and it goes on for what feels like hours. Until I wake up and realize three things:

First, I have a horrible headache.

Second, it's the middle of the night.

Third, the noise-music is actually just regular noise, and it's coming from downstairs.

Burglars, I think. *They broke in. They're not even trying to be quiet—they probably have weapons.*

I have to get out. Call 911. I have to warn Liam and make sure that he—

I sit up with a frown. "Liam." But *of course*.

I fling myself out of bed and stomp out of my room. I'm halfway down the stairs when it occurs to me: my curls are all over the place, I'm not wearing a bra, and my shorts were already too small fifteen years ago, when my middle school issued them free of charge as part of my lacrosse uniform. Well. Too bad. Liam's going to have to deal with it, and with my "There Is No Planet B" T-shirt. It might teach him something.

By the time I reach the kitchen, I am considering one-clicking on a bullhorn to sneak up on him while he's asleep every night for the next six months. "Liam, do you *know* what time it is?" I erupt. "What are you even . . ."

I'm not sure what I expected. Definitely not to find the contents of the fridge cluttering every inch of the counter; definitely not to see Liam intent on slaughtering a stalk of celery like it stole his parking spot; definitely not to see him naked, *very* naked, from the waist up. The plaid pajama bottoms he's wearing have a low waist.

Very low.

"Could you please put something on? Like a baby-seal fur coat, or something?"

He doesn't stop chopping his celery. Doesn't look up at me. "No."

“No?”

“I’m not cold. And I live here.”

I live here, too. And I have every right not to look at that brick wall he calls a chest in my own kitchen, which is supposed to be a soothing environment where I can digest food without having to stare at random male nipples. *Still*, I decide to let the matter go and push it to the back of my mind. By the time I’m ready to move out, I’m going to need therapy, anyway. What’s one more trauma to deal with? Right now, I just want to go back to sleep. “What are you doing?” I ask.

“My tax return.”

I blink. “I—what?”

“What does it look like I’m doing?”

I stiffen. “I don’t know what it *looks* like, but it *sounds* like you’re just banging pans together.”

“The noise is an unfortunate by-product of me making dinner.” He must be done with the celery, because he moves to slicing a tomato—is that *my* tomato?—and back to ignoring me.

“Oh, and that’s totally normal, isn’t it? Cooking a five-course meal at one twenty-seven in the morning on a weeknight?”

Liam finally lifts his eyes to mine, and there is something unsettling about his gaze. He seems calm. He looks calm, but I know he’s not. *He is furious*, I tell myself. *He is really, really furious. Get out of here.* “Did you need anything?” His tone is deceptively polite, and my self-preservation is clearly still asleep in bed.

“Yes. I need you to keep it down. And that better not be my tomato.”

He pops half of it in his mouth. “You know,” he says evenly while chewing, managing to talk with his mouth full and yet still look like the aristocratic product of several generations of wealth, “I’m usually not in the habit of being awake at one twenty-eight in the morning.”

“What a coincidence. Neither was I, before meeting *you*.”

“But today—that is, yesterday—the entire legal team I run ended up having to work past midnight. Because of some very important missing documents.”

I tense. He cannot mean—

“Don’t worry, the documents were found. Eventually. *After* my boss tore me and my team a new one. Sounds like something went wrong when they were delivered.” If he could incinerate people with eye lasers, I’d be long cremated. Clearly he knows everything about my little afternoon spite-attack.

“Listen.” I take a deep breath. “It wasn’t my proudest moment, but I’m not your PA. And I don’t see how it justifies you banging all the pots in the house in the middle of the night. I have a long day tomorrow, so—”

“So do I. And as you can imagine, I’ve had a long day today. And I’m hungry. Which means that I’m not going to keep it down. At least not until I’ve had dinner.”

Until about ten seconds ago I was angry in a cool, reasonable way. All of a sudden, I am ready to wrestle the knife out of Liam’s hand and slice his jugular. Just a tiny bit. Just to make him bleed. I won’t, because I don’t think I’d flourish in jail, but I’m also not going to let this go. I’ve tried to have measured responses when he refused to let me install solar panels, when he threw away my broccoli stir-fry because it smelled “swampy,” when he locked me out of the house while I was on my run. But this is the final straw. I’m done. The back of my camel is broken in two. “Are you fucking *kidding* me?”

Liam pours olive oil in a pan, cracks an egg in it, and seems to revert to his default state: forgetting that I exist.

“Liam, whether you like it or not, I. Live. Here. You can’t do whatever the hell you want!”

“Interesting. You seem to be doing exactly that.”

“What are you talking about? *You* are making an omelet at *two in the damn morning*, and *I* am asking you not to.”

“True. Although there *is* the fact that if you had done your dishes this week I wouldn’t need to wash them so noisily—”

“Oh, shut up. It’s not like you don’t leave your stuff around the house all the time.”

“At least I don’t stack garbage on top of the trash can like it’s a Dadaist sculpture.”

The sound that comes out of my mouth—it almost scares me. “*God*. You are *impossible* to have around!”

“That’s just too bad, since I’m here.”

“Then just *move the fuck out*!”

Silence falls. An absolute, heavy, very uncomfortable silence. Just what we both need to replay my words over and over in our heads. Then Liam speaks. Slowly. Carefully. Angry in a scary, icy way. “Excuse me?”

I regret it immediately. What I said and *how* I said it. Loud. Vehement. I am many things, but cruel is not one of them. It doesn’t matter that Liam Harding has displayed the emotional range of a walnut, I said something hurtful and I owe him an apology. Not that I particularly *want* to offer him one, but I should. The problem is, I just can’t stop myself from continuing. “Why are you even here, Liam? People like you live in mansions with uncomfortable beige furniture and seven bathrooms and overpriced art they don’t understand.”

“People like *me*?”

“Yes. People like *you*. People with zero morals and way too much money!”

“Why are *you* here? I’ve offered to buy your half about a thousand times.”

“And I said no, so you could have spared yourself about nine hundred and ninety-nine of them. Liam, there is no reason for you to want to live in this house.”

“This is *my* family’s house!”

“It was Helena’s house as much as it’s yours, and—”

“Helena is fucking *dead*.”

It takes a few moments for Liam’s words to fully register. He abruptly turns off the stove and then stands there, half-naked in front of the sink, hands clenched around the edge of the counter and muscles as tight as guitar strings. I can’t stop staring at him, this—this *viper* who just

mentioned the death of one of the most important people in my life with such angry, dismissive carelessness.

I am going to *destroy* him. I'm going to *annihilate* him. I am going to make him suffer, to spit in his stupid smoothies, to break his vinyls one by one.

Except that Liam does something that changes everything. He presses his lips together, pinches his nose, then wipes a large, exhausted hand down his face. All of a sudden something clicks inside my head: Liam Harding, standing right in front of me, is tired. And he hates this, *all of this*, just as much as I do.

Oh God. Maybe my broccoli stir-fry really did stink, and I should have put it in a Tupperware. Maybe the *Frozen* soundtrack can be a tiny bit annoying. Maybe I could have signed for that stupid package. Maybe I wouldn't react well to someone coming to live under my roof, either, especially if I didn't have a say in the matter.

I press the heels of my hands into my eyes. Maybe I am the asshole. Or at least one of them. God. Oh *God.*

"I . . ." I rack my brain for something to say and find nothing. Then some dam inside me breaks, and the words explode out. "Helena was my family. I know you don't get on with your family, and . . . maybe you hated her, I don't know. Granted, she could be really grumpy and nosy, but she . . . she loved me. And she was the only real home I ever had." I dare to glance at Liam, half expecting a sneer of derision. A snarky comment about Helena that will make me want to punch him again. But he's staring at me, attentive, and I force myself to look away and continue before I can change my mind. "I think she knew that. I think maybe that's why she left me this house, so that I'd have some kind of . . . of something. Even after she was gone." My voice breaks on the last word, and now I'm crying. Not full-on bawling like when I watch *The Lion King* or the first ten minutes of *Up*, but quiet, sparse, implacable tears that I have no hope of stopping. "I know you probably see me as some . . . proletarian usurper who's come to take over your family fortune, and believe me, I get it." I wipe my cheek with the back of my hand. My voice is rapidly losing heat. "But you have to

understand that while you're living here because you're trying to prove some point, or for some sort of pissing contest, this pile of bricks means the world to me, and . . ."

"I didn't hate Helena."

I look up in surprise. "What?"

"I didn't hate Helena." His eyes are on his half-made omelet, still sizzling on the stove.

"Oh."

"Every summer she'd leave California for a few weeks. Where did you think she went?"

"I . . . she just said she spent her summers with family. I always assumed that . . ."

"Here, Mara. She came here. Slept in the room next to yours." Liam's voice is clipped, but his expression softens into something I've never seen before. A faint smile. "She claimed it was to check up on my world-pollution plans. Mostly, she nagged me about my life choices in between meeting with old friends. And she kicked my ass at chess a lot." He scowls. "I am positive she cheated, but I could never prove it."

"I . . ." He must be making this up. Surely. "She never mentioned you."

His eyebrow lifts. "She never mentioned *you*. And yet you were in her will."

"But . . . But, wait. Hang on a minute. At the funeral . . . I thought you didn't get along with your family?"

"Oh, I don't. They're pretentious, judgmental, performative assholes—and I'm quoting Helena, here. But she was different, and I got on with her. I cared about her. A lot." He clears his throat. "I'm not sure where you got the idea that I didn't."

"Well, you not coming to the funeral fooled me."

"Knowing Helena, do you think she'd have cared?"

I think about my second year. The one time I organized a small surprise party for Helena's birthday in the department, and she just . . . left. Literally. We yelled *Surprise!* and dropped a handful of balloons. Helena gave us a scathing look, stepped inside the room, cut a slice of her birthday cake

while we stared in silence, and then went to her office to eat it alone. She *locked* herself in. “Okay. That’s a good point.”

Liam nods.

“Do you know why she left me the house?”

“I do not. Initially I figured it was some kind of prank. One of her chaotic power plays. Like when she’d guilt-trip you into watching old shows with her?”

“God, she *always* picked—”

“*The Twilight Zone*. Even though she already knew all the twist endings.” He rolls his eyes. Then his expression changes. “I didn’t know her health had gotten so bad. I called her two days before she died, exactly two days, and she told me . . . I shouldn’t have believed her.”

My heart sinks. I was there. I know the exact conversation Liam is referring to, because I heard Helena’s side of it. The way she fielded questions and minimized the concerns of the person on the other side of the line. She lied her way through an hour of chatter—it was obvious that she was happy about the call, but she wasn’t honest about how bad things had gotten, and I felt uncomfortable about the deception. Then again, she did that with everyone. She’d have done the same with me if I hadn’t been her ride to doctors’ appointments.

“I wish she’d let me be there.” Liam’s tone is impersonal, but I can hear the unsaid. How painful it must have been to be kept in the dark. “But she didn’t, and it was her decision. Just like leaving you the house was her decision, and . . . I’m not happy about it. I don’t understand it. But I accept it. Or at least, I’m trying to.”

For the first time, I realize what my arrival in D.C. must have been like from Liam’s perspective: Some girl he’d never even heard about, some girl who’d had the privilege to be with Helena during her last few days, suddenly showing up and forcibly wiggling her place into his home. His life. While he was trying to come to terms with his loss and mourn the only relative he felt close to.

Maybe he acted like an asshole. Maybe he never made me feel welcome or wasn’t particularly nice, but he was in pain, just like me, and . . .

What a total mess. What an obtuse idiot I've been.

"I . . . I'm sorry for what I said earlier. I didn't mean any of it. I don't know you at all, and . . ." I trail off, unsure how to continue.

Liam nods stiffly. "I'm sorry, too."

We stay there, in silence, for long beats. If I go back to my room now, Liam will order a pizza and I'll be able to fall sleep without having to hunt down my stash of earplugs. I almost leave to do just that, but something occurs to me: Things could be better. *I* could be better. "Maybe there could be a . . . a truce of sorts?"

He lifts one eyebrow. "A truce."

"Yeah. I mean . . . I could . . . I guess I could stop raising the thermostat to twenty-five degrees as soon as you turn around. Wear a sweater, instead."

"Twenty-five degrees?"

"I'm a scientist. We don't really do Fahrenheit, since it's a ridiculous scale and . . ." He's looking at me with an expression that I can't quite decipher, so I quickly change the topic. "And I guess I could lay off with the Disney soundtracks?"

"Could you?"

"Yeah."

"Even *The Little Mermaid*?"

"Yes."

"What about *Moana*?"

"Liam, I'm really trying, here. If you could please—" I am ready to storm out of the kitchen when I realize that he's actually smiling. Well, sort of. With his eyes. Oh my God, was that a joke? He *jokes*? "You're not as funny as you think."

He nods, and doesn't say anything for a moment or two. Then, "The Disney soundtracks are not that bad." He sounds pained. "And I'll try to be better, too. I'll water your plants when you're out of town and they're about to die." I knew he'd let my cucumber die on purpose. I *knew* it. "And maybe I'll make a sandwich for dinner, if I get hungry past midnight."

I lift my eyebrow.

Liam sighs. "Past ten P.M.?"

“That would be perfect.”

He crosses his huge arms on his equally huge, still bare chest, and then rocks a bit on his heels.

“Okay, then.”

“Okay.”

The silence stretches. Suddenly, this situation feels . . . tense. Sticky. A verge of some sort. A turning point.

A good time for me to leave.

“I’m going to . . .” I point toward the stairs, where my bedroom is. “Have a good night, Liam.”

I don’t turn around when he says, “Good night, Mara.”

Chapter 4

Four months, three weeks ago

There are plenty of things I wouldn't expect Liam Harding to do when he enters the kitchen.

For instance, he's unlikely to whip out castanets and flamenco his way around the island. To break into a Michael Bolton hit from the '80s. To sell me a leaf blower and recruit me into some gardening tools MLM venture. These are all *very* improbable events, and yet none of them would shock me as much as what he actually does. Which is to look at me and say:

"It's . . . nice outside today."

It's not that it isn't. It is, in fact, really nice. Unseasonably warm. It's because the Earth is dying, of course. Rising global average temperatures are associated with widespread fluctuations in weather patterns, and that's why we're still wearing lightweight jackets, even though it's late November in D.C. and Christmas trees have been popping up for weeks now. A few years ago, Helena wrote a paper about the way human action is increasing the periodicity and intensity of extreme weather events. It got published in *Nature Climate Change* and has about a zillion citations.

I could say all of this to Liam. I could be my most obnoxious self and lecture on the topic for hours. But I don't, and the reason is that even through his clipped, hesitant tone and his currently lowered gaze, I can recognize an olive branch when it bites me in the ass.

Which, right now, it absolutely is. Biting, that is.

It's been about two weeks since I first became aware that Liam is capable of human emotions. And as it turns out, being in a truce while living together means having significantly fewer shouting matches, but still

doesn’t make finding topics of conversation any easier. Which is fine. Most of the time. It’s a big house, after all. But on the rare occasions in which our schedules overlap and we end up in the living room or in the kitchen together . . .

Awkward.

As fuck.

“Yeah.” My nod is sprain-your-neck enthusiastic—overcompensating. “It’s nice. To have good weather, I mean.”

Liam nods, too (stiffly, but maybe I’m just projecting), and just like that, we’re back to square one: silence.

I bite my thumbnail. Apparently I did *not* stop doing that when I turned fourteen. I need something to say. What do I say? *Quick, Mara. Think.* “Um . . . So . . .”

No thoughts. Head empty.

I let my sentence dangle like an overcooked noodle and temporize by turning around to grab a . . . a what? A spatula? A toaster? A snack! Yes, I’ll have a snack. I think I bought single servings of Cheez-Its. Trying to cut back and all that. Except that I can’t find them in my cupboard. There’s a family box. Another. A third one, in cheddar flavor—Jesus, I have a problem. But the little bags are not . . . Ah, there they are. Highest shelf, of course. I remember throwing them up there, thinking it’d be a problem for Future Mara.

Future Mara tries, but cannot reach it. So she looks back to ask Liam to grab one for her, and her heart sinks.

He’s staring at where my shirt rode up on my lower back—i.e., my ass.

Well, no. He isn’t. William K. Harding would never stoop so low, and the idea that he’d voluntarily glance at my scrawny ass is laughable. But he is looking at me, *there*, his lips slightly parted and his hand forgotten in midair, which likely means that he’s . . . horrified? By my eight-year-old sweatpants, I bet. Or by the explosion of freckles on my skin. Or by . . . God, what panties do I even have on? Please, let it not be the ones with Jeff Goldblum’s face Hannah got me last year. And how many holes do they

have? He's going to report me to the underwear police. I will be executed by the Victoria's Secret mob, and—

He clears his throat. "Here." He bravely overcomes his disgust and comes to stand behind me. He is just *massive*. So big that he completely blocks the overhead light. For a microsecond I feel warm, oddly tingly. Then he drops a bag next to my hand without me even having to ask, and says, "Should I move them to a lower shelf for you?"

His voice is a little gravelly. Maybe he's coming down with a cold. I hope I don't get it. "Um, that would be great. Thanks." It takes him about half a second. Then we're both back to our original position, me with my coffee, Liam with his tea, and I realize that in the mildly mortifying adventures of the last minute, I forgot to think of a decent olive branch topic of conversation. *Fantastic.*

So I blurt out: "The Nationals are doing well this season." I *think*? I overheard a dude say it on the bus. Liam's always playing video games with his dude friends. He probably likes sports, too.

"Oh. That's . . . good." Liam nods.

I nod.

More awkward nodding, and then silence. Again.

Okay. This is *way* too uncomfortable. I'm going to install motion sensors in every room in the house so I can make sure our paths never cross again—

"What sport is that, again?"

I look up from the coffee I'm furiously stirring. "Mmm?"

"The Nationals. What sport?"

"Ah . . ." I glance around the kitchen, looking for clues. Find a grand total of none. "I have no idea."

Liam dunks a tea bag in his mug, a gleam of amusement in his eyes. "Me, neither."

We leave the room from opposite doors. I wonder whether he's aware that we almost smiled at each other.

Chapter 5

Four months, two weeks ago

I look out of the window, trying to use my engineering degree to approximate how many meters of snow fell overnight. One? Seventeen? Sadly, there was no Ballpark How Snowbound You Are 101 in my grad school curriculum, so I give up to glance down at my phone.

There's no way I can make it to work, and my entire team at the EPA is in the same situation. Sean's car is stuck in his driveway. Alec, Josh, and Evan can't even make it *to* their driveway. Ted is on his fifth joke about extreme weather events. The Slack channel pings with a few more messages cursing all forms of precipitation, and then Sean makes the call that we all should just work from home. Accessing the secure server from our EPA-issued laptops. Which for me is a bit of a problem.

So I text Sean:

Mara: `Sean, I don't have my EPA-issued laptop at home with me.`

Sean: `Why?`

Mara: `You haven't issued me one yet.`

Sean: `I see.`

Sean: `Well, you can just take the day to answer emails and stuff like that, then. We're just going to try to fix the electrostatic sprayer issue today, so we don't really need you.`

Sean: `And next time make sure to remind me that you don't have a laptop yet.`

How passive-aggressive would it be to forward to Sean the reminder email I sent him two days ago? Very, I imagine.

I sigh, text a quick `Will do`, and try not to grind my teeth over the fact that I'd love to give my input on the electrostatic sprayer issue. It's actually closely related to my graduate work, but who am I kidding? Even if I were present, Sean would act like he always does: politely hum at my contributions, find a trivial reason to discard them, and fifteen minutes later paraphrase and restate them as his own ideas. Ted, my closest ally in the team, tells me not to take it too personally, because Sean's a jerk to pretty much everyone. But I know I'm not imagining that his most egregious behavior is always directed at me ("I wonder why," I muse to myself, stroking my woman-in-STEM chin). But Sean's the team leader, so . . .

Did I say that I love my new EPA job? Maybe I lied. Or maybe I do love it, but I hate Sean more. Hard to tell.

I spend the day doing what work I can without access to classified information—i.e., very little. I briefly FaceTime with Sadie, but she's on a deadline for some hippy-dippy eco-sustainable project ("I haven't slept in thirty-eight hours. Please, tie an anvil to my neck and drop me in the Sargasso Sea."), Hannah is unreachable (probably frolicking with the walruses on a slab of ice), and . . . That's it. I don't really have any other friends.

I should probably work on that.

By one P.M. I am mortally bored. I nap; I watch a YouTube video on the plate arrangement of the stegosaurus; I paint my nails a pretty red matte color; I write a half-assed post for my *Bachelor* blog on my expectations for the next season; I practice braiding my hair in a crown; I wonder whether I'm a workaholic, decide that I probably am.

I can't remember the last time I was inside all day. I've always been a bit restless, a bit too antsy. *Much too active*, my parents would say as they tried to enroll me in every possible team sport to keep me busy. They aren't bad people, but I doubt they wanted a kid, and I know for sure that they weren't fans of whatever changes my arrival brought to their lifestyle. Probably the reason they were never huge fans. We talk maybe once or twice a year now—and I'm always the one who calls.

Oh well.

I lean my forehead against the chilly glass of the window, feeling an odd sense of isolation, as though I'm disconnected from the entire world, swaddled in a muffled white cocoon.

I should start dating again.

Should I start dating again?

Yeah. I should. Except that . . . men. No, thank you. I am well aware that #NotAllMen are condescending shitlets like Sean, and I've had my share of perfectly nice boyfriends who didn't feel the need to *Actually* me when I tried to have a conversation. But even at their best, all my romantic relationships felt like work. In a way Sadie and Hannah and Helena never did. In a way *actual work* never did. And for what? Sex? Jury's still out on whether I even care about that.

Maybe I should skip the dating and just visit Sadie in NYC as soon as the weather gets better. Yeah, I'll do that. We'll make a weekend out of it. Ice-skate. Get that frozen hot chocolate thing she's been raving about, the one she insists is not just a rebranded milkshake. But in the meantime it's still snowing, and I'm still stuck in here. Alone.

Well, not *alone* alone. Liam's around. He came downstairs this morning, large hand brushing over the smooth wooden railing, looking . . . not quite disheveled. But he didn't bother with his usual suit. The faded jeans and worn T-shirt made him seem younger, a more human version of his aloof, stern self. Or maybe it was the hair, dark as usual, but sticking up just a bit in the back. If we hated each other a tad less, I'd have reached up and fixed it for him. Instead I watched him step into the roomy entrance until it didn't feel quite so roomy anymore. No high ceiling is *that* high when someone as tall as Liam stands under it, apparently. I stared at him half-mesmerized for a few moments—till I realized that he was staring right back. *Oops.* Then he looked out the window, sighed deeply, and headed back upstairs. Phone already on his ear as he gave calm, detailed instructions about a project that's probably aimed at freeing the planet from the evil clutches of photosynthesizing plants.

I haven't seen him since, but I heard him. Laughter here. Barefooted steps there. Creaking wood and the beep of the microwave. Our rooms are

one and a half hallways away. I know he has a home office, but I've never been in there—a bit of a tacit Do-not-go-to-the-West-Wing, *Beauty and the Beast* situation. I've considered snooping around when he was gone, but what if he put live traps around? I picture him coming home, finding me wailing, my ankle tangled in a snare. He'd probably leave me there to starve.

Plus, he doesn't go out much. There are that couple of friends of his who come over to do surprisingly nerdy stuff (which reminds me a bit too much of me, Sadie, and Hannah making brownies for a *Parks and Rec* marathon —which in turn is vaguely painful—so I pretend it doesn't happen). His workdays seem to be sixteen hours long, even when I'm not being a petty gremlin about signing his mail, but that's about it. I wonder if he dates. I wonder if he sneaks a different girl into the house every night and tells her *Shh, be quiet. My squatting ginger roommate will key my record player if we're too loud*. I wonder if I'm simply failing to notice the masked orgies he has in the kitchen every weekend while I'm tucked under my granny quilt, carefully composing my blog posts.

I wonder why I wonder.

When I pad downstairs for dinner, the house is dark and silent. And cold. Honestly, how is Liam not freezing? Is it the seventy pounds of muscles? Does he coat himself in baby-seal fat? I shake my head as I raise the thermostat and heat up more food than I need to eat (but, crucially: not more food than I *can* eat).

There are a few living/sitting/front/lounge/whatnot rooms on the first floor, but my favorite is the one connected to the kitchen. It has a large, comfortable couch that probably cost more than my graduate education, a soft area rug I like to stealthily caress when I'm home alone, and the pièce de résistance: a giant TV. I move my (many) food containers to the walnut coffee table and let myself plop down on the couch.

For reasons I don't understand, Liam pays for cable television and for about fifteen different streaming services that I've never seen him use. I'm in no way above exploiting FGP Corp's blood money, so I find a rerun of a

season twelve episode of *The Bachelorette*. Not my favorite, for reasons I explained at length on my blog (don't judge me), but decent. I settle in.

Ten minutes later, an idiot with an obvious tanning-bed addiction is fist-fighting an idiot who clearly snorts protein powder, all under a delighted girl's eyes—i.e., the premise of the show. But I realize that not all noises come from the TV. When I mute it, I can hear another argument. From upstairs. In Liam's voice.

It's not loud enough to make out the gist of it, but I do manage to eavesdrop the occasional words. *Wrong*. *Unethical*. *Opposed*, maybe? Quite a few firm *No*s, but that's about it. After a brief moment, the sounds are muffled again. Another minute, and a door slams; feet quickly make their way down the steps.

Crap.

I consider quickly switching to a Lars von Trier movie, but Liam arrives before I can fool him into thinking that I'm an intellectual. I look up from my egg roll and he's there, in the slice of kitchen I can see from the couch, looking like . . . murder.

That is: more than usual.

My first instinct is to flatten myself against the couch, keep watching my trashy show and eating my excellent food. But he turns, our eyes meet, and I have no choice but to hesitantly wave at him. He answers with a curt nod, and . . . he looks broody and dark, like he just had a terrible ten minutes, perhaps a terrible day. Even worse, he looks like he's ready to take it out on the first person he'll find in his path—which, given the weather conditions, is regrettably going to be me. He looks like he needs a distraction, and a very stupid idea pops into my head.

Don't do it, Mara. Don't do it. You're gonna regret it.

But Liam is visibly clenching his teeth. The way he's staring into the open fridge suggests that he'd like to strangle each and every jar of tartar sauce (for unknowable reasons, he owns three). Maybe the ketchup, too. The line of his overbroad shoulders is so tense I could use it as a bubble level, and—

Ah. Screw it.

“So.” I clear my throat. “I ordered way more food than I need.” I resist the urge to cover my discomfort with nervous laughter. He can probably smell it, my abject terror. “Would you, um, like some?”

He slowly closes the fridge door and turns around. “Excuse me?” He looks at me like I just offered to go rob a bank together. To buddy–sign up for aerial yoga. To spend the rest of the night moth watching.

“Takeout. Chinese. Want some?”

He glances at the window. Yes, it’s still snowing. We’re officially the North Pole. “You ordered takeout.” He sounds dubious.

“Not today. Two days ago. I always order too much, because leftovers taste better. Especially the lo mein, it really needs to soak into the sauce to . . .” I stop. And flush. “Anyway, would you like some?”

“We’re in the middle of a snowstorm, Mara.” Why am I shivering all of a sudden? Ah yes. Because it’s cold. Not because he said my name. “You should be hoarding your food.”

Yeah, I should. “It’s about to go bad. And I’m happy to share.”

It takes Liam an inordinate amount of time to answer. Ten good seconds of him staring skeptically, perhaps suspecting me to be a deranged murderess on the prowl for roommates to poison. Eventually he says: “Sure.”

He sounds everything but sure. Very cautious. Looks cautious, too, as he makes his way to me. He slides his hands in the back pockets of his jeans and looks around morosely, and it’s obvious that he has no idea what to do—sit on the couch, the chair, the floor. Eat standing in the middle of the living room. It occurs to me for the first time that his entire aloof, stern persona might hide a smidge of awkwardness. Could he be one of those people who are hyperconfident in professional settings and the total opposite in their social lives? Nah. Unlikely.

I pat a spot next to mine, already regretting this. We’ve never sat together before. So far, every interaction between us has been circumstantial. The act of sitting next to each other implies intentionality and a longer duration. A new territory.

Weird.

Liam is so heavy and tall that the cushion dips when he sits down, and I have to tense my abs and readjust to avoid sliding toward him. I hand him a plate and a pair of chopsticks, pretending there's nothing unusual about any of this. He does the same as he accepts them with a brief nod, his fingers never accidentally touching mine.

"What are you watching?" he asks.

"*The Bachelorette*." No sign of recognition. "It's this stupid, *amazing* show. Reality. You don't have to watch with me. Save yourself while you can." Surprisingly, Liam stays put. Still looks a bit like he wouldn't mind trashing the entire house, but his expression is slightly less bloodthirsty. Progress? "So, Sheryl, the girl in the green dress—the only girl—has a few weeks to choose a husband among all the guys."

Liam squints at the TV for a moment. "Based on what? They all look the same."

"They do, don't they?" I shrug. "They take her on dates. And chat. Toward the end they might even have sex."

Is he flushing? No. It's just the light. "On-screen?"

"Hey, it's ABC, not HBO." I put a spring roll on his plate. Then I take a look at him—his arms filling his shirt, his chest, his general . . . hugeness—and add two more. How many million calories does he need a day? I should find out. In the name of science. "You see the guy wearing glasses he obviously doesn't need in the vain hope of looking less imbecilic?"

"Blue shirt?"

"Yes. We're rooting for him."

"Are we."

"Yep. Because he's from Michigan. And I went to U of M for undergrad," I explain, licking a drop of hoisin sauce off my thumb. His eyes linger on my lips for a too-long moment, then abruptly slide away.

"I see."

"It's a great place. Ever been?"

"I don't believe so, no." He's still not looking at me. Maybe he holds a profound and irrational hatred for Ann Arbor?

"Where did you go to school?"

He seems mildly surprised that I'm asking. Fair, since I haven't exactly excelled at turn taking and conversation making in the past. "Dartmouth. Then Harvard Law School."

"Right." I nod knowingly. "That sounds . . . cheap."

He has the decency to look sheepish, so I take pity on him. "Want some cashew chicken?"

"Ah . . . Yes, please."

"Here. You can finish it, I've already eaten like, ten pounds of it."

He nods. "Thanks."

Liam Harding. Being polite. Wow. "You're welcome."

For a couple of minutes we are silent—Liam watching the TV, me sneakily watching Liam as he eats ravenously, large quick bites that are youthfully endearing. Then he turns to me.

"Mara."

"Yes?"

"You clearly are some kind of genius."

Uh? Am I? "Is this—are you—making fun of me?"

He looks dead serious and faintly offended at the idea. "You're basically a rocket scientist."

"*Basically* being the operative word."

"And Helena, who had ridiculous standards, chose you to work with her. You're obviously remarkable."

Oh God. Is this a compliment? Am I going to blush? "Um . . . thanks?"

He nods. "What I don't understand is, why is someone as smart as you watching this shit?"

I smile into my fried rice. "You'll see."

One hour later, when Sheryl says, *"I think our relationship has come a long way, but I am not convinced that it could develop any further . . ."* I slam my hand on my armrest and yell, "Oh, come *on*, Sheryl," just as Liam slaps his armrest and yells, "Sheryl. What the hell?"

We turn to each other and exchange a brief, bemused look. *Told ya,* I think at him with a smile. His mouth twitches, like he heard me loud and clear.

". . . at this point, I just know that it's not gonna work out between us. Can I walk you out?"

Liam shakes his head, horrified. "That's just a bad decision."

"I know."

"He's the best of the lot."

"Soooo stupid, right? She's gonna regret this so bad. I know it, because I've already seen the season." *Multiple times.* I reach for one of the beers Liam took out of the fridge a few minutes ago. "Want another crab rangoon?" I ask.

He nods and settles back, long legs stretched next to mine on top of the coffee table. The snow outside is still falling, and we wait for the next episode to start.

* * *

He shovels snow like it's his one and only vocation.

Maybe it's the isolation-induced insanity speaking, but there's something hypnotic about it. The rhythmic rise and fall of his shoulders under the black fleece. The seemingly effortless way he's been going at it for hours, occasionally stopping to wipe the sweat off his brow with the back of his sleeve. I press my forehead to the window and just . . . stare. I can almost hear Helena's voice in my head (*Would you like to borrow my birding binoculars?*). I blithely ignore it.

Maybe that's what he majored in at Dartmouth: Snow Shoveling. Nicely complemented by a minor in Muscles. His honors thesis was titled *The Importance of Armceps in Ergonomic Excavating*. Then he moved to graduate school to study How-to-Make-a-Mundane-Winter-Task-Look-Attractive Law. And here I am, unable to take my eyes off a decade of overpaid-for higher education.

This is getting weird. It's giving me flashbacks to the first time I saw him, when his dark eyes and those (frankly ridiculous) shoulders hit me like a brick in the head. It's not a memory I want to revisit, so I look away and

head downstairs to make lunch, blaming my temporary lunacy on skipping breakfast. This is what I get for falling asleep late last night, halfway through the finale, in the middle of explaining to Liam between yawns that *Bachelor* and *Bachelorette* contestants get mandatory STD screenings. What I get for waking up this morning on the couch, a soft, heavenly smelling blanket laid over me. I wonder where it came from, anyway. Not from the living room. I'm positive that there wasn't one around.

It's not that Liam and I are friends now. I don't know him any better than I did yesterday—except, I guess, that he has some surprisingly valid opinions when it comes to reality TV. But for some unparsable reason, when I start working on my soup I find myself making enough for two.

See, this is why humans are not meant to be sequestered at home. Boredom and loneliness turn their minds to mushy oatmeal, and they start imposing their poorly cooked food on unsuspecting Snow Lawyers. And I'm apparently embracing my weird, because when Liam comes in, dark hair damp and curling from the melting snowflakes, cheeks glowing from the exercise, I tell him, "I made lunch."

He stares, arms dangling at his sides, as though unsure how to answer. So I add, "For both of us. As a thank-you. For doing that. The shoveling, I mean." He stares some more. "If you want. It's not mandatory."

"No. No, I . . ." He doesn't finish. But when he notices me reaching toward a high shelf to the bowls, he comes up behind me and sets two on the counter.

"Thank you."

"No problem." I might be imagining this, but I think I hear him inhale slowly before he moves away. Does my hair smell bad? I washed it yesterday. Has Garnier Fructis finally failed me after years of faithful service? I'm wondering whether it's time to switch to Pantene by the time we're politely eating at the kitchen table, in front of each other, like we're a young family in a Campbell's commercial.

Problem: without the TV on, it's pretty conspicuous that we have nothing to talk about. Liam glances at me every few seconds, as though me stuffing my face is either something he likes to look at, or something totally

hideous—who's to say? As the silence stretches, I am once again regretting every choice I've ever made. And when his phone rings, I'm so relieved I could fist-pump.

Except that he doesn't pick up. He checks caller ID (*FGP Corp—Mitch*), rolls his eyes, and then turns the phone around in a dismissive movement that has me chuckling.

Liam gives me a puzzled look.

"Sorry. I didn't mean to . . . Just . . ." I shrug. "It's nice to know that you hate your colleagues, too."

He lifts one eyebrow. "You hate your colleagues?"

"Well, no. I don't hate them. I mean, I *sometimes* hate them, but . . ." Why is this about *me*? "Anyway, do you think the snow is over for good?"

"Why do you sometimes hate your colleagues?"

"I don't. I misspoke. It's just . . ." Liam has stopped eating and is looking at me like he's actually interested. *Ugh.* "They're all men. All engineers. And men engineers can be . . . yeah. And I'm the newest arrival, and they're all kind of chummy already. And I'm pretty sure that Sean, my boss, thinks that I'm some sort of pity diversity hire. Which I'm not. I'm actually a really good engineer. I have to be, or Helena would have butchered me in my sleep."

He nods as though he understands. "She'd have butchered you awake."

"Right? She wasn't exactly forgiving. And I'm not complaining—I owe her so much. She truly helped me become a better scientist, but everyone in my team treats me as though I'm some infant engineer who doesn't know what an ohm is, and—" Why am I *still talking*? "Well, everyone except for Ted, but I'm not sure whether he actually respects me or is just trying to get laid, since he's already asked me out like, three times, which makes things kind of awkward . . ."

Liam's face instantly hardens. His spoon sets in the bowl with a loud clink. "This is sexual harassment."

"Oh, no."

"At the very least, it's highly inappropriate."

"No, it's not like that—"

“I can talk to him.”

I blink. “What?”

“What’s his last name?” Liam asks, like it’s a totally normal question. “I can talk to him. Explain that he has made you uncomfortable and he should stop—”

“What?” I let out a laugh. “Liam, I’m not going to tell you his last name. What are you gonna do, pour a barrel of oil on his house?”

He looks away. Like it was an option.

“No, I . . . I actually like Ted. He’s nice. I mean, I’ve even considered saying yes. Why not, right?” *Why not?* is what Helena would say, but Liam’s expression darkens at that. Or maybe it’s just my entire soul, darkening at the idea of putting on eyeliner to go out with a guy who’s perfectly fine and excites me as much as boiled spinach. “It’s just that . . .” I shrug. How to explain that I am forever uninspired by the men I meet? I won’t even bother. It’s not like he cares. “Thank you, though,” I add.

He looks like he’d like to insist, but just says, “Let me know if you change your mind.”

“Um. Okay.” I guess I have a six-foot-three mountain of muscles in my corner now? It’s kinda nice. I should make soup more often. “So, since I have you here,” *and to avoid dropping into awkward silence again*, “what’s up with the pictures?”

“The pictures?”

“The black-and-white pictures of trees and lakes and stuff. Hanging on literally every single wall.”

“I just like to take them.”

“Wait. You took the pictures yourself?”

“Yeah.”

“Does it mean that you’ve actually been to all those places?”

He swallows a spoonful of soup, nodding. “It’s mostly national parks. A few state ones. Canada, too.”

I’m a little shocked. Not only are the pictures good, professional-level good, but . . . “Okay”—I point at the frame behind the table, a mobius arc in

what looks like Sierra Nevada—“this is not the work of someone who hates the environment.”

He gives me a puzzled look. “And I hate the environment?”

“Yes!” I blink. “No?”

He shrugs. “I might not compost my own feces or hold my breath to avoid emitting CO_2, but I do like nature.”

I’m a little dumbfounded. “Liam? Can I ask you a question that will possibly make you want to throw the bowl at me?”

“It won’t.”

“You haven’t heard the question.”

“But the soup is really good.”

I beam. And then I immediately feel self-conscious at the surge of warmth that comes from knowing he likes my cooking. Who cares if he does? He’s a random dude. He’s Liam Harding. On paper, I hate him.

“You said you really respected Helena’s work. And that she was your favorite aunt. And that you were close. But you work at FGP Corp, and I’ve been wondering . . .”

“How I’m still alive?”

I laugh. “Pretty much.”

“I’m not quite sure why she spared me.”

“A bit out of character, isn’t it?”

“I hid the sharp knives every time she visited. But she mostly focused on sending me daily texts about all the evil FGP Corp is doing in the world. Maybe she was going for a slow grind?”

“I just . . . I don’t understand how you love Helena and nature *and* working at a company that lobbies to eliminate carbon taxes like its aim is to plunge civilization into fiery darkness.”

He huffs out a laugh. “You think I *enjoy* working there?”

“I assumed you did. Because you seem to work all the time.” I flush—okay, fine, I noticed his hours, sue me—but he doesn’t seem to care. “You . . . don’t?”

“No. It’s a shitty company and I hate everything it stands for.”

“Oh. Then why . . .” I scratch my nose. Oh. I did *not* expect that. “You’re a lawyer. Can’t you, um, lawyer elsewhere?”

“It’s complicated.”

“Complicated?”

The spoon scrapes the bottom of the bowl for a moment. “My mentor recruited me.”

“Your mentor?”

“He was one of my professors. I owe him a lot—he helped me get all my internships lined up, advised me during law school. When he asked me to take this job, I didn’t feel like I could say no. He’s my boss now, and . . .” He leans back in his chair and runs a hand through his hair. Tired. He looks very tired. “I have a lot of complicated feelings about what FGP Corp does. And I don’t like the company, or its mission. But in the end, it’s a good thing that I’m around. If it weren’t me, someone else would do my job just as well. And at least I can be there for the team I lead. And run interference between them and my boss when it’s necessary.”

I think about the words I overheard last night. *Unethical*. *Wrong*. “Is he the one you were arguing with? On the phone?” He lifts one eyebrow, and my cheeks warm. “I promise I wasn’t eavesdropping!” But Liam shrugs as though he doesn’t mind. So I smile, leaning forward across the table. “Okay, maybe I was. Just a bit. So, what’s his last name?”

“Whose name?”

“Your boss. Maybe *I* can talk to *him* while *you* talk to *Ted*? Some good old reciprocal proxy bullying? Mutual warn-off? Leave-My-Friend-Alone Sixty-Nine?”

He smiles at me then—a full, real smile. His first in my presence, I think, and it makes breathing that much harder, the temperature of the room that much hotter. How—*why* is he so handsome? I stare at him, speechless, unable to do anything but notice the clear brown of his eyes, the lopsided way his lips stretch, the fact that he seems to be studying me with a warm, kind expression, and—

Our eyes dart to his phone. Which is ringing again.

“Work?” I ask. My voice is hoarse.

“No. It’s . . .” He stands from the table and clears his throat. “Excuse me. I’ll be right back.”

As he walks out, I hear him chuckle. On the other side of the phone, a female voice is saying his name.

Chapter 6

Four months ago

I take a careful step out of the shower, letting my toes dig deep into the thick, soft mat. It turns out to be a lethally poor choice, because I do it in the same exact moment Liam opens the bathroom door to take a step inside.

It leads to me jumping. And flailing. And yelling:

"Aaaaaaaaah!"

"Mara? What—"

"Aaah!"

"Sorry—I didn't—"

My entire body is slippery and frantic—not a good combination. I almost lose my balance trying to wrap the shower curtain around me. Then I *do* lose my balance, and I'm positive Liam can see everything.

The outie belly button Hannah always teases me about.

The sickle-shaped lacrosse scar above my right boob.

Said right boob, *and* the left one.

For a fraction of a second we both stand motionless. Staring at each other. Unable to react. Then I say, "Can you—could you, um, hand me that towel over there?"

"Ah—sure. Here you go. I . . ."

He extends his arm and turns the other way while I wrap the towel (his towel; Liam's towel) around myself. It's fluffy and clean and it smells good and—who uses black towels, anyway? Who produces them? Where does he even buy them, Bloodbath and Beyond?

"Mara?" He is standing under the doorframe, pointedly looking away from me.

“Yes?”

“Why are you in my bathroom?”

Crap. “Sorry. I’m *so* sorry. My shower isn’t working, and . . . I think there’s something wrong with a pipe, and . . . I don’t know, but I called Bob.”

“Bob?”

“The plumber. Well, *a* plumber. He’s coming out tomorrow morning.”

“Oh.”

“But I went for a run earlier, and I was all sweaty and smelly, so . . .”

“I see.”

“Sorry. I should have asked before. You can turn now, by the way. I’m decent.”

Liam does turn. But only after about ten seconds of what looks like a pretty intense internal debate. His expressions are never the easiest to read, but he seems a little flustered.

A lot, actually. As in, even more than I am.

Which is odd. I’m the one who got boobsposed, and Liam is probably very used to being with naked women. That is, *actually* naked women. Way more naked than I currently am. Let’s be real—his ex is likely a Victoria’s Secret Angel who recently quit modeling to finish a doctorate in art history and become a junior curator at the Smithsonian. She has an impeccable belly button and knows what PlayStation button to press to throw a grenade. Did I say *his ex*? They’re still dating, for all I know. Having a very athletic sex life. I’m talking role play and toys. Butt action. Lots of oral, which they both excel at. Okay, this train of thought needs to crash right now.

Maybe he’s just embarrassed for me? Not that he should be. I’m pretty. I mean, I *think* I’m pretty. Cute, in a befreckled, wish-I-was-two-inches-taller, slightly-self-conscious-about-that-hump-on-my-nose way. Sometimes, usually after Sadie has put eyeliner on me, I even think I’m beautiful. But I’ll never be as attractive as Liam. Is that why he’s doing this weird thing—staring while obviously trying his best not to stare?

“I’m so sorry I didn’t warn you. I thought you were out of town or something. Because you didn’t come home last night, and . . .” I feel a bit

embarrassed that I noticed. But how could I not? Ever since the snowstorm, we've gotten into this weird rhythm. Dinner together at seven. Not that there's an acknowledged agreement or anything, but I know from before that he used to eat a little later, and I know from my whole life that I used to eat a little earlier, and somehow we converged on a time that works for both of us . . . Maybe I was close to texting him last night. But decided not to, because it seemed like crossing some kind of unspoken line.

"No, I just . . . I had to be at work. Because of a deadline. I was going to warn you, but . . ." *You didn't want to cross some kind of unspoken line?* I want to ask. But one does not speak of unspoken things, so I just go with:

"Of course." I clear my throat. "I'll go to my room. Get dressed."

"Right."

I make to leave. Except that Liam's still standing there, blocking the exit. The only exit, if one doesn't count the window, which I briefly consider before acknowledging that it's not a feasible option. Not in my current state of dishevelment. "You are . . ." He doesn't seem to understand *where* he is. I'd gesticulate and point it out, but I have to clutch my towel with both hands to avoid flashing him, and—

"Oh. Oh, right, I . . ." He takes a large step to the side. Too large—he's basically plastered against the sink now.

"Okay. Thanks again for letting me use your bathroom."

"No problem."

I really should leave now. "And I borrowed a bit of your shampoo. Well, stole. It's not as if I'm ever going to return it. But, you know."

"It's okay."

"I love Old Spice, by the way. Solid choice."

"Oh." Liam looks everywhere but at me. "I just grab the first one I see at the store."

I know in that moment, I simply know, that Old Spice is William K. Harding's favorite brand of personal hygiene products, and that he suffers deep shame because of it. "Right. Of course." He can be adorable, sometimes. "Hey, just FYI, I'm not embarrassed. So you shouldn't be, either."

“What?”

“I don’t care that you saw me naked. Because I know you don’t care. Just saying, we don’t need to be weird about it. Believe me”—I laugh—“I know you’re not going to use your annoying ginger roomie’s tiny freckled boobs as spank bank material.”

I expect him to reply with a joke, like he usually does, but he doesn’t. He doesn’t reply at all, in fact. Just presses his lips together, nods once, and all of a sudden things feel even more awkward. *Crap.*

“Anyway. Thanks again.”

“You’re welcome.”

I step out with a small wave and notice two things: he’s staring hard at his feet, and his left hand is a tight fist at his side.

Chapter 7

Three months ago

There's nothing wrong with the waveguide. That, I know for sure. The transformer and the stirrer seem fine, too, which has me thinking that the problem is in the magnetron. Now, I'm not really an expert, but I'm hoping that if I tinker with the filament the assembly will fix itself and—

"Is this because last night we watched *Transformers*?"

I look up. Liam, a soft smile on his face, is standing on the other side of the kitchen island, taking in the microwave oven parts I meticulously laid out over the marble countertop.

I might have made a mess.

"It was either this or writing Optimus Prime fanfiction."

He nods. "Good choice, then."

"But also, your microwave isn't working. I'm trying to fix it."

"I can just buy a new one." His head tilts. He studies the components with a slight frown. "Is this safe?"

I stiffen. "Are you asking because I'm a woman and therefore unable to do anything remotely scientific without causing radioactive pollution? Because if so, I—"

"I'm asking because *I* wouldn't know where to start, and because *I* am so ignorant about anything remotely scientific that you could be building an atomic bomb and I wouldn't be able to tell," he says calmly. As though he doesn't even need to be defensive, because the idea that me being a puny-brained girl never even entered his mind. "But you clearly can." A pause. "Please don't build an atomic bomb."

"Don't tell me what to do."

He sighs. “I’ll make room for the plutonium in the cheese drawer.”

I laugh, and realize that it’s the first time I’ve done it in hours. Which, in turn, makes me sigh. “It’s just . . . Sean is being a total dick. Again.”

His expression darkens with understanding. “What’d he do?”

“The usual. That deco project I told you about? I was explaining this really cool idea about how to fix it, but he only let me talk for half a minute before telling me why it wouldn’t work.” I fiddle with the magnetron, then start reassembling the oven. The second both my hands are occupied, a strand of hair decides to fall into my left eye. I blow it away. “Thing is, I’d already considered all of his objections and found solutions. But did he let me continue? Nope. So now we’re going with a much-less-elegant method, and . . .” I trail off. At this point, Liam gets two to four Sean-related rants a week from me. The least I can do is keep them short. “Anyway. Sorry for being defensive.”

“Mara. You should report him.”

“I know. It’s just . . . this constantly belittling behavior is so hard to prove, and . . .” I shrug—bad idea, since my hair is now back in my eyes. I feel a little stuck. A lot stuck.

“So, what’s Sean’s last name?” Liam asks.

“Why?”

“Just curious.” He tries to sound casual, but he’s so bad at it. He’s clearly the worst liar in the world—how did he get through law school? It makes me smile every time.

“You need to practice,” I say, pointing my screwdriver at him.

“Practice?”

“Practice telling . . .”

My voice trails off. Because Liam is reaching up to brush his fingers against my cheekbone, a faint smile on his lips. My brain short-circuits. What—? Did he—?

Oh. *Oh*. My hair. My lost, wayward strand of hair. He tucked it behind my ear. He’s just being nice and helping his ginger klutz roommate, who in turn is having a major brain fart. *Classy, Mara. Very classy.*

“Practice telling what?” he asks, still staring at the shell of my ear. It’s probably misshapen, and I never even knew it.

“Nothing. Lies. I . . .” I clear my throat. *Get it together, Floyd*. “Hey, you know what?” I try to keep my tone light. Change the topic. “The beginning of this cohabitation was an absolute nightmare, but I like this a lot.”

“This?”

“This thing.” I begin to screw in the back plate of the microwave. “Where we chat without throwing chairs at each other and you offhandedly ask for the last names of dudes who are mean to me with the obvious idea of committing unsanctioned acts of vigilante justice against them.”

“That’s not what I—”

I lift my eyebrow. He blushes and looks away.

“Anyway, I like this much better. Being friends, I guess.”

He glares at me. “I’m *not* your friend.”

“Oh.” I almost recoil. Almost. “Oh. I—I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to imply that—”

“The other night Eileen gave Bernie a rose, and you said that it was a good move. That’s not something I can accept from a friend.”

I burst out laughing. “Come on, he’s cute. He is a dog trainer. He likes K-pop!”

“See, this? The reason you’re my sworn enemy.” He shakes his head at me, and I laugh harder, and then my laughter dies down and for a second we’re just smiling at each other and an unfamiliar, liquid warmth spills inside me.

“I am *positive* Helena would have rooted for Bernie.”

He snorts. “You say it like it’s an endorsement. Like she didn’t constantly try to set me up with random people I cared nothing for.”

“She did the same with me!”

“And when I was a teenager she dated this guy who had been on a four-month shower strike.”

“Oh God. Why?”

“Not sure. The environment?”

“No—why was she dating him?”

Liam winces. “Apparently—and I quote—‘astounding carnal chemistry.’ ”

I morbidly contemplate Helena’s sex life until Liam breaks the quiet and asks, “Do you ever think about switching jobs?”

I shake my head. “It’s the EPA. Where I always wanted to be. Seriously, fifteen-year-old Mara would travel through time to shank me if I were to quit.” I think I picked up on an odd note in his question, though. “Why did you ask? Do *you* ever think about switching jobs?”

He shakes his head, too. “I couldn’t,” he says. But I’m starting to know him, a little bit. I’m more attuned to his moods, his thoughts, the way he turns inward whenever he considers something serious. There is a wall of sorts that he builds between himself and everyone who tries to know him. Sometimes I wish it weren’t there. So I push gently against it and ask, “How are things at work?”

He is silent for a while, hands pressed wide against the island, watching me quietly as I finish screwing the pieces back together. My hair remains safely tucked behind my ear. “He asked me to fire someone today.”

“Oh.” I already know who *he* is. Mitch. Liam’s boss. Whom I privately hate with the intensity of a thousand microwave ovens. Who’s the reason Liam feels like he cannot pack up his black-market-organ-priced graduate degrees and his years of experience being a corporate meanie and find another job. “Why?”

“Someone on my team made a really stupid mistake. But fixable. And still . . . it’s just a mistake. We all fuck up—I know *I* do.” He absentmindedly rubs the back of his hand against his lips. “I really thought I could talk him out of it.” He shakes his head, and I frown. And press my lips together. And order myself to count to five before I say anything, just to avoid being intrusive or aggressive. Five, four, three—

“Honestly, your boss is a shit nugget and he doesn’t deserve you and you should quit and leave him to stir in his shit broth!”

Liam looks up, surprised. And amused, I think. “A shit nugget?”

I flush. “A valuable but underrated insult. But Liam, really, you deserve to have a better job. And before you point out that it’s hypocritical of me to

tell you to switch jobs while I won't do it myself, let me say that it's a totally different situation. I *love* my job—I just hate the people I have to do it with. Including Sean. Especially Sean. Really, mostly Sean." Oh, how I'd love to boil my post-run socks, make soup out of them, and then feed it to Sean.

"You could ask for a transfer."

"I plan to. But it won't help." I shrug and plug the microwave back in. "The EPA's opening a new unit. I'm applying to be transferred, but Sean the Asshole is, too." I roll my eyes. "He's impossible to shake off. Like a parasitic toenail fungus."

"So you'll be competing with him for the position?"

"Well, no. He's applying to lead. I'd be among the plebs—a lowly team member."

"You can't lead because you don't have enough seniority?"

"Oh, I don't think there are seniority requirements."

"Then why are you not applying to lead it?"

"Because—" I snap my mouth shut and look down at my screwdriver. Yes. Why? Why *wouldn't* I apply for a leader position? What is wrong with me? It's not like Sean is smarter than I am. He just loves to impose the sound of his own voice to unsuspecting passersby. And maybe I don't have enough leadership experience to know that I'll be a good boss, but I do have enough Sean experience to know that *he* won't be. He keeps calling me Lara, for fuck's sake. In *emails*. That he writes to my email address, marafloyd@epa.gov. Dude, you can literally *copy* and *paste*?

I look up. Liam is staring at me with a calm expression, as though patiently waiting for me to reach this very exact conclusion: I am better than Sean. Because *everyone* is better than Sean, and that includes me.

I feel a shiver of something warm run down my spine, as though I'm being held. Which is weird, since I haven't hugged someone in . . . God, months. Not since Helena.

"Tell you what." I put my hands on my hips, suddenly determined. "I'm going to apply for the leader position."

"That's exactly what you should—"

“If *you* leave your job.”

He pauses, then exhales a laugh. “If I leave my job, who’ll keep you in the expensive multi-ply toilet paper lifestyle you’re accustomed to?”

“You will, since you’re probably sitting on generational piles of old New England money. Plus, you could totally still be a lawyer for other, slightly less disgusting corporations. If there are any, that is. And if we strike this blood pact and I get the job, there’s something even better in it for you.”

“You let me hold Sean’s head in the toilet bowl?”

“No. Well, yes. But also, if I get a team leader position, I’d be making more money. And I’ll finally be able to move out.” *Without needing to sell my half of the house*.

Liam’s expression shifts abruptly. “Mara—”

“Think about it! You, walking around naked in a pleasantly freezing house, scratching your butt in front of a fridge full of tartar sauce, cooking tacos at three A.M. while listening to postmodern industrial pop on your gramophone. All around are giant screens, broadcasting video game playthroughs twenty-four/seven. Sounds nice, huh?”

“No,” he says flatly.

“That’s because I forgot to mention the best part: your pesky ex-roommate is gone, nowhere to be seen.” I beam. “Now, tell me you’re not going to love every second of—”

“I won’t, Mara. I—” He turns away, and I can see his jaw clench like it used to before, when my presence in this house annoyed him and he considered me the bane of anything good. But his hand tightens around the edge of the counter once, and he seems to collect himself. He studies me for a long moment.

“Please,” I press. “I won’t apply if you won’t. Do you really want to condemn me to a lifetime of Sean?”

He closes his eyes. Then he opens them and nods. Once. “I won’t leave my job—”

“Oh, come on!”

“—till I have another lined up. But I will start looking around.”

I smile slowly. “Wait—for real?” I did *not* think this would work.

“Only if you apply for the leader position.”

“Yes!” I clap my hands. “Liam, I’ll help you. Are you on LinkedIn? I bet recruiters would be all over you.”

“What’s LinkedIn?”

“Ugh. Do you at least have a recent headshot?”

He stares at me blankly.

“Fine, I’ll take a picture of you. In the garden. When there’s good natural light. Wear the charcoal three-piece suit and that blue button-down—it looks amazing on you.” He cocks his eyebrow, and I instantly regret saying that, but I’m too excited at the idea of this weird professional-suicide pact to blush too hard. “This is *amazing*. We’ve got to shake on it.”

I thrust out my hand, and he takes it immediately, his own firm and warm and large around mine, and—it might be the first time we touch on purpose, as opposed to arms brushing while we’re working at the stove, or fingers grazing as he sorts out my mail. It feels . . . nice. And right. And natural. I like it, and I look up to Liam’s face to see whether he likes it, too, and . . . there are a thousand different expressions passing on his face. A million different emotions.

I can’t begin to parse even one.

“Deal,” he says, voice deep and a little hoarse.

He uses his free hand to turn on the microwave—which, lo and behold, is working again.

Chapter 8

One month, two weeks ago

Rain is my favorite kind of weather.

I am most partial to summer storms, their strong winds and hot air, the way they make me feel like I'm sitting on the humid inside of a balloon that's about to burst. As a kid, I'd run outside as soon as the rain started just to get all wet—which seemed to outrage my mother to no end.

But I'm not particular. It's barely February, early in the night, and the hard drops beating a tattoo on the plastic of my umbrella, they just make me happy. I smile when I unlock the front door. Hum, too. I walk down the hall, listening to the rain instead of what's happening inside the house, and that must be the reason I don't hear them.

Liam and a girl. No: a woman. They are in the kitchen. Together. He's leaning back against the counter. She's sitting on it, at his side, close enough to lay her cheek on his shoulder while she shows him something on her phone that has both of them smiling. It's the most relaxed I've seen Liam with anyone. Clearly a very intimate moment that I should *not* be interrupting, except that I can't make myself move. I feel my stomach sink and remain rooted to the floor, unable to retreat as the woman shakes her head and murmurs something in Liam's ear that I cannot hear, something that has him chuckling in low, deep tones, and—

I must gasp. Or make some sort of noise, because one moment they're laughing, arms pressed against each other, and the next they're both looking up. At me.

Shit.

I try really hard not to let my eyes take in how cozy and comfortable he looks, how familiar and at ease. It's nothing like what happens when he and I accidentally bump against each other in the hallway, like that charged, electric tension that seems to crackle between us when we forget ourselves and our hands happen to brush together. But that's the point, right? Any physical contact between me and Liam is probably unwanted on his part, while this . . .

This is mortifying. I want to get out of this room and never come back. Buy an insulated lunch bag and a camping stove, shove them in my bedroom, and be completely self-sufficient.

The woman, though, doesn't seem nearly as unsettled, or self-conscious about the fact that she's currently perched on a piece of furniture in a home that's not hers, her skirt riding up to show long, toned legs. She smiles at me, and somehow, somewhere, I find my voice. "Sorry. I'm so sorry, I didn't mean to interrupt . . . I wanted to get something to drink, and I . . ." And I? *And I will now go to my room to flush myself down the toilet. Good-bye, cruel world.*

"I thought you'd be . . ." Liam's voice seems deeper than usual. I wonder if they were about to take whatever this is to his bedroom. *Oh God. Oh God, I just interrupted my roommate and his girlfriend. I'm such a loser.* "Out. I thought you'd be out."

Oh. Right. I was supposed to go on a date myself. With Ted. Something I agreed to do the other day under the impetus of: meh, why not? This morning I told Liam why I'd be home late, except that I ended up canceling because . . . I didn't really feel like going.

For some reason.

That is unclear to me.

"No. I mean, yes. Yes, I was. But . . ." I gesture vaguely in the air. As good an explanation as I can come up with.

"Oh."

"Yeah. I . . ." I should really go to my room and do that self-flushing thing. But it's hard, with Liam staring at me like that. Half-curious, half-happy to see me, half–something else. It's the first time I find him with

someone who's not Calvin or another one of his dude friends he's obviously known since forever, someone who's clearly . . . Okay. He's on a date. With a woman. About to get laid, probably. And I interrupted. *Shit.*

"I'm . . . I'm gonna go now, so you guys can—"

"No need," a voice says.

A voice? Ah. Yes. Right. There is a third person in the room. A beautiful woman with long dark hair, who's still sitting on the counter, glancing with captivated interest between me and Liam, and . . .

"I was *just* about to leave," she says. But it's a lie. She was definitely *not* about to leave. "Right, Liam?" She and Liam exchange a silent, loaded look that I'd give half a kidney to be able to decipher.

"Oh, no. You don't have to leave," I say weakly. "I—"

"By the way, I'm going to introduce myself, since Liam here is clearly not going to." She hops down with grace that I've seen only in ballet dancers and Olympic gymnasts before, and holds out her hand. I hate myself for trying to remember if it's the same hand that was wrapped around Liam's arm while her head was on his shoulder. "I'm Emma. You must be the famous Mara?"

Why she would know my name is an absolute mystery. Unless Emma and Liam are very serious, and then Liam would have mentioned his annoying roommate once or twice, and will you look at that? It appears that I just cannot bear the thought. "Yes. Um . . . Nice to meet you."

Emma's handshake is cool and firm. She smiles briefly, nice and self-assured, then turns to pick up her jacket from a stool.

"Well. This was fun. Informative, too. Mara, I hope we'll meet a *ton* more times. And you . . ." She turns to Liam. Her voice drops lower, but I can still make out the words. "Cheer up, buddy. I don't think you're as doomed to a lifetime of pining as you think. I'll call you tomorrow." She's not very tall and has to stand on her tiptoes to kiss him on the cheek, one hand pressing against his abs for balance, and if Liam minds having her up in his space, he doesn't show it. Then there is a friendly wave, directed at me this time, a cheerful "Good night," the sound of her heels against the parquet flooring on her way to the entrance, and then—

Gone.

That noise was the front door opening and closing, which means that Liam and I are alone.

“Liam, I’m *so* sorry. I didn’t mean to . . .”

“To?” He scratches the back of his neck, looking confused by my reaction. He’s still leaning against the counter, and I can’t make myself move away from the entrance. I can’t make myself continue and apologize for interrupting his date. *I was going to leave. I promise. You guys could have continued in your room, Liam. I wouldn’t have minded.*

Really.

“How did the presentation go?”

I look up from inspecting my shoes. “What?”

“Your presentation, today? For the lead position?”

“Ah.” Right. The presentation. The one I’ve been complaining about for days. The one I practiced with him yesterday. And the day before. The one he probably knows by heart. “Um, very good. Good. Well, okay. Passable.”

“It’s getting worse by the word.”

I wince. “It was . . . I stumbled a bit.”

“I see.”

“But maybe I still did better than Sean?”

“Maybe?”

“Probably.”

Liam smiles. “Probably?”

I smile back. “Almost certainly.”

“What a speedy improvement.”

I chuckle, and he pushes away from the counter and comes to stand right in front of me. Like he wants to be closer for this conversation. Closer to me.

“It’s bad news for you, though,” I say.

“Is it?”

“If I get this position, you’re going to have to step up and find a new job, too.”

“Ah. Yes.”

“We made a deal.”

“A deal is a deal.”

“Also, after the interview they gave us information on the salary. It’s a big raise. I’ll definitely be able to move out.”

His eyes harden, then switch back to a neutral mask. “Right.”

“What?” I tease him. “You afraid you can’t afford to buy your own creamer?” *What does he even use it for? I still don’t know.*

“Just concerned I’ll have to watch Eileen make terrible life choices on my own.”

“Eileen knows what she’s doing. As I explained in my last blog post.”

“Which I have, of course, read.”

He’s not funny. He’s not *that* funny. I’m not half in love with his weird sense of humor. “I can’t believe you commented ‘delete your account.’ It’s cyberbullying, Liam.”

He is still smiling, and there is something warm unfurling in my chest now. Which really shouldn’t be there, because . . . Because. “Are you and your friend . . . ?” I ask.

“My friend?”

“Emma.”

“Ah.”

Silence. I wring my hands, realizing that I haven’t really formulated a question. *Is she your* . . . No. Too direct. *Are you two dating?* And what is this hiccup in my heart as I contemplate the thought? Maybe Liam has never mentioned a girlfriend. Or any girl. But what did I think? That he was living in celibacy? It’s not my business, anyway. We’re just friends. Good friends. But friends.

“What?” He gives me a long look, like I just asked a preposterous question that’s not grounded in reality. The reality that I just walked in on him PDAing her.

“I thought you two . . . ?”

“No.” He shakes his head once. Then he shakes it again. “No, Emma is . . . We were in kindergarten together. And she . . . No. We’re friends, good friends, but nothing like that.”

“Oh.” Oh? Really? No way. Way?

“We’re just friends,” he repeats again. Like he wants to make sure I know it. Like he’s afraid that I don’t believe him. Which, to be fair, I don’t. Look at her. Look at *him*. “She’s actually . . . She knows that I . . .” He wipes a hand down his face, like he always does when he’s overwhelmed or tired. It’s a gesture I’m seeing more of lately. Because Liam has been letting me see more of him. They’re not all bad, the sharp edges and deep grooves of this man’s personality. Unexpected, but not bad at all.

“Knows that you?”

“That I don’t usually . . . I never . . . Well, *almost* never, apparently . . .” Liam shakes his head, as if to say *Never mind*, and I remain unsure as to what he almost never does, because he doesn’t continue and I’m not certain that I want to probe. Plus, he’s looking at me in a way I can’t understand, and I’m suddenly feeling like it’s time to skedaddle. “I’m gonna go to sleep, okay?” I smile. “I have an early morning, tomorrow.”

He nods. “Okay. Sure.” But when I’m almost out of the room, he calls after me. “Mara?”

I pause. Don’t turn around. “Yeah?”

“I . . . Have a good night.”

It doesn’t sound like what he originally meant to say. But I answer, “You, too,” and run back to my room anyway.

Chapter 9

One month ago

"I had lots of fun tonight."

"Good. Thank you. I mean . . ." I clear my throat. "So did I."

Ted is nothing if not predictable. He took me to the Ethiopian restaurant I told him I'd been wanting to try (excellent); he raised topics of conversation I know enough about to feel comfortable, but not so familiar that I got bored within a few minutes; and now, now that he's walked me to my door, he's going to lean in and kiss me, just like I could have anticipated when he picked me up exactly three hours ago.

It is, predictably, a good kiss. A solid kiss. It could probably lead into good sex if I decided to invite him inside for a drink. Solid sex. Long-time-no-have sex. We're talking years, here. Helena would pop the champagne and remind me to dust off the cobwebs.

And yet.

I have no intention to ask him to come in. It's truly been ages, but this thing with Ted is just . . . no.

He's a nice guy, but this is not going to work, for a variety of reasons. That, I tell myself, have nothing to do with how long Liam stared at me earlier today, before Ted pulled up our driveway. Or with the way he instantly averted his gaze when I caught him. Or with the hoarse quality of his voice when he took in my dress and said, "I . . . You look beautiful."

He sounded like he wanted to say something else. A little wistful. Almost apologetic. It made me regret spending thirty minutes putting on makeup to go out with someone else, some poor guy I don't even want to impress for the simple reason that he isn't . . .

Yeah.

“I . . .” I take a deep breath and take a step back from Ted, whose only fault is . . . not being another guy. I cannot picture him watching *The Bachelor* with me, which is apparently a deal breaker. The more you know, huh? “I’m gonna go inside now. But thanks for everything. I had a lovely evening.”

If Ted is disappointed, I can’t tell. To his credit, he hesitates only briefly. Then he smiles and retreats to his car without any *I’ll call you* or *See you next time* that we both know would be nothing more than lies of politeness. I silently thank the EPA gods for transferring him to another team last week, and make my way inside.

I’m surprised to find Liam in the living room, sitting on the couch with a beer in one hand, a stack of papers in another, ridiculously cute reading glasses perched on his nose. Or maybe I’m not. It’s Saturday night, after all. We usually spend our Saturday nights on that very couch, watching TV, talking about everything and nothing. It makes sense that he’s here, even though I was gone.

For the life of me, I can’t remember a better activity than staying at home in my pj’s and hanging out with my roommate.

“What are you reading?”

Liam glances up at me, takes in my short-but-not-too-short dress, my loose hair, my red lips, then immediately looks back to his papers. “Just a guideline document for work.”

“How to achieve your very own oil spill in ten easy steps?”

His lips quirk upward. “I think you only need the one.”

“Listen, we’ve been over this. It’s okay if you don’t want to quit just yet, but the very least you can do is *not* work on weekends. Come on, Liam. Do it for the environment.”

He sighs, but he takes off his glasses and puts away the papers. I smile and reach forward to grab his beer and take a sip without bothering to ask. Liam studies me in silence, but doesn’t start reading again. When I lift one eyebrow—*what?*—he caves, and asks: “Isn’t he coming in?”

“Who?”

Liam looks toward the entrance.

“Ah.” Right. Other men exist, too. Hard to remember, sometimes. “No. Ted’s not . . . He went home.”

“Oh.”

“I’m not . . . We’re not . . .” How to put it? “We haven’t . . .”

Liam nods, though he cannot possibly have made sense of what I just mumbled. And then he says nothing. And then things seem to get a bit weird. There is an odd tension in the room. Like we’re both holding back something. I’d rather not search inside myself to figure out what.

“I should go to bed.”

“Okay.” He swallows. “Good night.”

It might be that two fuzzy navels were too many, or maybe I just never really got the hang of high heels. The fact remains that I lose my balance and stumble just as I try to walk past him. His hands, large and solid and warm even through my dress, close around my hips until I’m stable again. I’m standing, and he’s sitting down, and like this I’m several inches taller than him, and . . . It’s new, seeing him from this perspective. He looks younger, almost softer, and my first drunken instinct is to cup his face, trace the line of his nose, run my thumb over his lower lip.

I stop myself, but my slow, misfiring brain doesn’t. It feeds me an odd image: Liam smiling and pulling me down in his lap. Pushing between my knees. His hands skimming up my thighs, under my dress, tickling my skin, making me laugh. He reaches my lower back and his grip tightens, long fingers sliding under the elastic of my panties, cupping my ass to press me to . . . *Oh*. He is hard. Big. Insistent. He arranges me exactly how he wants me and I exhale just as he groans in my ear, “Careful, Mara.”

Wait. What?

I blink out of whatever the hell *that* was, just as Liam lets go of me. He says, “Careful, Mara,” and I take a step back before I can humiliate myself with something moronic and utterly embarrassing.

“Thanks.” Our eyes hold for what feels like too long. I clear my throat. “Are you going to bed, too?”

“Not yet.”

“You are not allowed to read more oil spill stuff, Liam.”

“Then maybe I’ll just play a bit.”

“Without Calvin?” I cock my head. “Didn’t you say Calvin would come over?”

“He was supposed to.”

“You know what?” I run a hand through my hair. It’s a split-second decision. “I’m actually not that sleepy, either. Should I play with you?”

He laughs. “Really?”

“Yes. What?” I take off my shoes, grab a blanket—the one he put on me that first night, the one that’s been in this room ever since—and let myself fall on the couch, right next to him. A little too close, maybe, but Liam doesn’t complain. “I have a Ph.D. I can pretend to kill bad guys using a . . . joystick?”

“Controller.” He shakes his head, but he looks . . . happy, I think. “Have you ever played a video game?”

“Nope. Full disclosure, they look awful and I’m not sure why an obviously smart person with a bunch of Ivy League degrees that cost more than my internal organs could ever be so much into this pew-pew crap, but I run a *Bachelor* blog, so I have no leg to stand on.” I shrug. “So, what happened to Calvin?”

“Couldn’t make it.”

“Playing with someone else?”

“A date.”

I hum. “Maybe you should have joined him. Was Emma busy?”

He gives me a look that I cannot quite decipher. As though there’s something catastrophically wrong about what I said. “I told you, Emma doesn’t want to date me any more than I want to date her.”

I doubt it. Who wouldn’t? Also, how freaked out would you be if I told you that the other night I dreamt of you and Emma, sitting side by side in the kitchen, and I was sad? But only for a little. Because after a while it wasn’t you and Emma. It was you and me and you were standing between my legs and you put your hands on my inner thighs and you pushed them

open, wider, to make room for yourself and— "You could date someone else, then," I blurt out. To put a halt to what's going on in my head.

"I don't think I want to, Mara."

"Right." My heart hiccups. "You wouldn't enjoy good food and pleasant conversation and getting laid."

"Is that how your date went?" he asks softly, not looking at me anymore.

"I just meant—" I'm flustered. "You might enjoy dating the right person."

"Stop channeling Helena."

I laugh. "Gotta keep up the household tradition of being nosy about people's personal lives." Something occurs to me, and I gasp. "You know what's *really* shocking?"

"What?"

"That Helena never tried to set us up. Like, you and me. Together."

"Yeah, that's—" Liam falls silent abruptly, as though something occurred to him, too. He stares into the middle distance for a moment and then lets out a low, deep laugh. "Helena."

"What?" He doesn't answer me. So I repeat, "Liam? What?"

"I just realized that . . ." He shakes his head, amused. "Nothing, Mara." I want to insist till he explains what revelation he appears to have reached, but he puts a controller in my hand and says, "Let's play."

"Okay. Who am I supposed to kill, and how do I do it?"

He smiles at me, and a million little sparks crackle down my spine. "I thought you'd never ask."

Chapter 10

Three weeks ago

When Liam arrives home, I can barely feel my toes, my teeth are chattering, and I am more blanket than human. He studies me from the entrance of the living room while pulling off his tie, lips pressed together in what looks a lot like amusement.

Asshole.

He observes me for long moments before coming closer. Then he crouches in front of me, widens the gap between the layers of blankets to better see my eyes, and says, “I’m afraid to ask.”

“Th-th-the heat isn’t working. I already looked into it—I think a fuse has b-blown. I called the guy who fixed it last t-time, he should b-be here in half an hour.”

Liam cocks his head. “You’re under three Snuggies. Why are your lips blue?”

“It’s freezing! I can’t get warm.”

“It’s not that cold.”

“Maybe it’s not that cold when you have six hundred pounds of muscles to insulate you, but I’m gonna d-d-die.”

“Are you.”

“Of hypothermia.”

He is *definitely* pressing his lips together to avoid smiling. “Would you like to borrow my baby-seal fur coat?”

I hesitate. “Do you really have one?”

“Would you want it, if I did?”

“I’m scared to find out.”

He shakes his head and sits next to me on the couch. “Come here.”

“What?”

“Come here.”

“No. Why? Are you planning to steal my seat? Back off. It took me ages to warm it up—”

I don’t get to finish the sentence. Because he picks me up, Snuggies and all, and lifts me across his lap until my ass is resting on his thighs. Which . . .

Oh.

This is new.

For a moment, my spine stiffens and my muscles tense in surprise. But it’s very brief, because he’s so deliciously *toasty*. Way cozier than my stupid spot on the couch, and his skin . . . it smells familiar and good. So, so good. “You’re so warm.” I let my forehead fall against his cheek. “It’s like you generate heat.”

“I think all humans do.” His nose touches the icy tip of my ear. “It’s physics, or something.”

“First law of th-thermodynamics. Energy can be neither created nor destroyed.”

His hand travels up my spine to cup my nape, and the temperature is suddenly five, ten degrees higher. Heat licks down my spine and spreads around my torso. My breasts. My belly. I almost whimper. “Except by you, apparently,” he says.

“It’s so unfair.” Liam’s thumb is tracing patterns on the skin of my throat, and I have no choice but to sigh. I’m already feeling better. I’m *glowing*.

“That you are where the heat goes to die?”

“Yeah.” I burrow closer into his chest. “Maybe my parents are secretly shark shapeshifters. Of the cold-blooded, poikilothermic variety. They forgot to warn me that I inherited zero thermoregulation skills and should never live on dry land.”

“It’s the only possible explanation.” His breath chuffs against my temples, a fine, pleasant itch.

“For my pathological inability to maintain thermal homeostasis?”

“For how little they appreciate you.” He’s suddenly holding me a little tighter. A little closer. “Also, for how rare you like your steak.”

“I . . . Medium rare.” My voice shakes. I tell myself that it’s because of the cold and not the fact that he remembers the things I told him about my family.

“Please. Basically raw.”

“Humph.” No point in arguing with him, not when he’s right. Not when his hand is running up and down my arm; a warming, calming gesture, even through the blankets. “Do you think he’ll be able to fix the fuse tonight?”

“I hope so. If not, I’ll run to the store and get you a heater.”

“You would do that?”

He shrugs. There are about ten layers between us (Liam vastly underestimated the Snuggies I can put on at once) but he feels so warm and solid. A few months ago, I thought him cold, in every possible way. Back when I used to believe that I hated him. “It feels like less work than driving you to the ER for frostbite treatment.” His cheek curves against my brow.

“You’re not as heartless as you think, Liam.”

“I’m not as heartless as *you* think.”

I laugh and lean back to take a look at him, because it feels like he might be smiling, a whole wide grin, and that’s a rare and wondrous phenomenon that I want to savor. He’s not, though. He’s staring at me, too, studying me in that weighty, serious way he sometimes does. First my eyes, and then my lips, and what is this, this moment of heavy, full silence that has my heart racing and my skin tingling?

“Mara.” His throat moves as he swallows. “I—”

Loud knocking makes us startle.

“The electrician.”

“Oh. Yeah.” My voice is both shrill and breathless.

“I’ll get the door, okay?”

Please, don’t. Stay. “Okay.”

“Do you think you can avoid hypothermia if I let go of you?”

“Yes. Probably.” *No*. “Maybe?”

He rolls his eyes in that put-upon way that reminds me so much of Helena. But his smile, the one I was looking for earlier—here it is. Finally. “Very well, then.” Without letting go, he stands and carries me all the way to the entrance.

I hide my face into his neck, humming with warmth and something else, unfamiliar and unidentifiable.

Chapter 11

Two weeks ago

I get the phone call on a Wednesday night, before dinner but after I've returned from work.

I am remarkably composed throughout: I *oh* and *ah* in all the right places; I ask pertinent, important questions; I even remember to thank the caller for sharing the news with me. But after we both hang up, I completely lose it.

I don't call Sadie. I don't text Hannah in the hope that she has reception in the belly of whatever Nordic sperm whale is her current residence. I run upstairs, almost tripping on carpets and furniture that's been in the Harding family for five generations, and once I'm in front of Liam's office I throw the door open without knocking.

Which, in hindsight, is not my most polite moment. And neither is the next, when I run to Liam (who's talking on the phone by the window), throw my arms around his waist with utter disregard for whatever he's doing, and yell:

"I got it! Liam—I got the job!"

He doesn't skip a beat. "The team leader position?"

"Yes."

His grin is blinding. Then he tells, "I'll call you back," to whoever is on the line, totally ignores the fact that their reply is "Sir, this is a time-sensitive issue—" and tosses the phone on the nearest chair.

Then he hugs me back. He lifts me up like he's too happy for me to even consider stopping himself, like this phone call I just had that changed my life changed his, too, like he's been wanting this as much and as intensely

as I have. And when he spins me around the room, one single, perfect whirl of pure happiness, that's when I realize it.

How incredibly, utterly gone for this man I am.

It's been there for weeks. Months. Whispering in my ear, creeping at me, hitting me in the face like a train on an iron track. It has grown too formidable and luminous for me to ignore, but that's okay.

I don't want to ignore it.

Liam sets me on my feet. His hands linger over me before he takes a step back—one hand trailing down my arm, the other pushing a lock of hair past my temple, behind my ear. When he lets go, I want to follow him. I want to beg him not to.

"Mara, you are fantastic. Brilliant."

I feel fantastic. I feel brilliant, when I'm with you. And I want you to feel the same. "I clearly deserve to choose what to watch on TV tonight."

"You choose what to watch on TV every night."

"But tonight I actually *deserve* it."

He laughs, shaking his head, holding my eyes. Time stretches. Heavy, sweet tension thickens between us. I want to kiss him. I want to kiss him so, so much. Should I ask him? Would he push me away? Or would he push right back, press me against his desk, turn me around and hold me down with a hand splayed between my shoulder blades and whisper to me *Finally*, and *Be still*, and *Let's celebrate*, and—

No. Stop.

I gasp. "Oh my God—what do you think Sean is doing right now?"

"Crying in the bathroom, I hope."

"Hopefully he's tweeting out his despair and listening to a My Chemical Romance playlist on Spotify. I *must* go stalk him on social media. Be right back." I make to skip out of Liam's office as fast as I ran in. He stops me, though, with a hand on my wrist.

"Mara?"

"Yes?"

I turn around. His happy, uncharacteristically open face has melted away into something else. Something more subdued. Opaque.

“You said . . . A few weeks ago, you said that if you got the job, you’d move out.”

Oh.

Oh.

The reminder stabs like a knife between my ribs. I *did* say that. I did. But it’s been weeks. Weeks of stealing food off each other’s plates and texting in the middle of the day to bicker about Eileen’s love life and that time he made me laugh so hard I couldn’t breathe for ten minutes.

Things . . . Haven’t things changed with us? Between us?

For a moment, I cannot speak. I don’t know what to say to the fact that his first thought was that I’d move out— No, that’s uncharitable. He was happy for me. Genuinely happy. His *second* thought was that he’ll finally go back to living alone.

I try to crack a joke. “Why? Are you kicking me out?”

“No. No, Mara, that’s not what I—” His phone rings, interrupting him. Liam gives it a frustrated glance, but by the time his eyes are on me again I’ve collected myself.

If Liam wants to live alone, that’s fine. He likes me. He cares about me. He’s a great guy—I know all of that. But being friends with someone doesn’t equate with wanting to spend every single moment of your life with them, and . . . yeah.

I guess that’s my own problem to solve. Something to work on once I move out and this part of my life is over.

“Of course I’m going to look for a new place.” I try to sound cheerful. With poor results. “I cannot wait to walk around naked and gorge myself on creamer to celebrate Eileen’s excellent life choices and . . .” I can’t make myself continue, and my voice trails off.

Liam’s eyes remain withdrawn. Absent, almost. But after a while he says, “Whatever you want, Mara,” in a kind, gentle tone.

I manage one last smile and slip out of his office as the first tear hits my collarbone.

Chapter 12

One week ago

No dimensional plane exists in which apartment hunting (more precisely: apartment hunting while heartbroken) could ever be pleasant. I have to admit, however, that browsing Craigslist on the phone with my friends while I sip on the overpriced red wine Liam got from an FGP Corp retreat does dull the pain of the ordeal.

Sadie just spent an hour recounting in wrathful detail how she recently went on a date with some engineer who later turned out to be a total dick—a problem, given that she actually liked the guy (as in really, *really* liked the guy). Even though she's being uncharacteristically dodgy about it, I am 97 percent sure that sex happened, 98 percent sure that the sex was excellent, 99 percent sure that the sex was the best of her life. It appears to be fueling her plans to lace the guy's coffee with toad venom, which, if you know Sadie, is pretty on-brand.

Hannah is back in Houston, which is good for her Internet connection, but bad for her peace of mind. She has been butting heads with some NASA big-shot guy who has been vetoing her pet research project for no reason whatsoever. Hannah is, of course, ready for murder. I can't see her hands through FaceTime, but I'm almost positive she's sharpening a shiv.

There is something reassuring in hearing about their lives. It reminds me of grad school, when we couldn't afford therapy and we'd engage in some healthy communal bitching every other night, just to survive the madness. There were some bad moments—it was grad school: there were *a lot* of bad moments—but in the end, we were together. In the end, everything turned out to be all right.

So maybe that's what will happen this time, too. I'm on the verge of homelessness, my heart feels like a stone, and I want to be with someone way more than that someone wants to be with me. But Sadie and Hannah are (more or less) here, and therefore things will turn out to be (more or less) all right.

"Men were a mistake," Sadie says.

"Big mistake," Hannah adds.

"*Huge*." I sink deeper into the living room couch, wondering if Liam, my personal mistake, will come home tonight. It's already past nine. Maybe he's out for dinner. Maybe, if he has something to celebrate, he'll sleep elsewhere. At Emma's, perhaps.

"Sometimes they're useful," Sadie points out. "Like that guy with a Korn T-shirt who helped me open a jar of pickled radishes in 2018."

"Oh yeah." I nod. "I remember that."

"Hands down my most profound experience with a man."

"In hindsight, you should have asked him to marry you."

"A missed opportunity."

"Could it be that we've just been exceptionally unlucky?" There is some noise on Hannah's side of the line. Maybe she *is* sharpening a shiv. "Could it be that the tides will turn and we'll finally meet dudes who don't deserve to be fed a bowl of thumbtacks?"

"It could be," I say. *Be positive*, Helena used to tell me. *Negativity is for old farts like me*. "Really, everything could be. It could be that we'll be randomly selected for a lifetime supply of Nutella."

Sadie snorts. "It could be that the surrealist slam poem I wrote in third grade will win me the Nobel Prize for literature."

"That my cactus will actually bloom this year."

"That they'll start producing Twizzlers ice cream."

"That *Firefly* will get the final season it deserves."

No one talks for a few seconds. Until Hannah says: "Mara, you broke the flow. Come up with something delightful and yet unobtainable."

"Oh, right. Uhm, it could be that Liam will come home, and ask me not to move out, and then he'll bend me over the nearest piece of furniture and

fuck me hard and fast." By the time I've finished the sentence, Sadie is laughing and Hannah is whistling.

"Hard and fast, huh?"

"Yup." I shake my head. "Absolutely preposterous, though."

"Nah. Well, no more than my slam poem," Sadie concedes. "So, how goes the unrequited crush?"

"It's not *really* a crush." Plenty unrequited, though.

"I thought we had agreed that fantasizing about being bent over the kitchen sink *does*, in fact, constitute a crush?"

I huff. "Fine. It's . . . good. Barely there, really. I don't really daydream about having sex with him that often." Liar. What a liar. "Still in the larval stage." It's hitting its teenage years and is strong as an ox. "I think that some distance will be good. I have a lead on a cheap-ish apartment downtown." I'll miss this place. I'll miss feeling close to Helena. I'll miss the way Liam makes fun of me for being unable to learn the buttons of the stupid PlayStation controllers. So, so much.

"And you're sure Liam's okay with you leaving?"

"It's what he wants." Things have been a little weird in the past week. Awkward. A bit of a step back for us, but . . . I'll be fine. It'll be fine. "I think it'll go away. The crush."

"Right," Sadie agrees, without looking much like she does agree.

"Very soon," I add.

"I'm sure."

"I just need him to . . . never find out about the furniture fantasies," I explain.

"Hm."

"Because it would make things weird for us," I explain. "For him."

"Yeah."

"And he doesn't deserve it."

"No."

"He's a good friend. Also, he's in the middle of making lots of life changes. I want to be supportive. And I like hanging out with him."

"Yup."

“Basically, I don’t want him to feel uncomfortable around me.”

“Nope.”

“Anyway.” My cheeks feel warm. It must be all the wine. “We should talk about something else.”

“Okay.”

“Like. Literally anything else.”

“Fine.”

“One of you should propose a topic.”

If they were here in person, Sadie and Hannah would exchange a long, loaded look. As it is, they are silent for a few moments. Then Hannah says, “Can I tell you a story?”

“Sure.”

“It’s about a friend of mine.”

I frown. “Which friend?”

“Ah . . . Sarah.”

“Sarah?”

“Sarah.”

“I don’t think I know her. Since when do you have friends I don’t know about?”

“Not important. So, a couple of years ago my friend Sarah moved in with this guy, um . . . Will. And initially they really hated each other, but then they figured out that they were more similar than they thought, and she started talking about him more and more, in increasingly positive terms. So Sadie and I—Sadie knows her, too—well, we were like, *Jeez, is she falling for this dude?* And then one night my friend confessed to me that she had very filthy, very elaborate-sounding fantasies about Will bending her over the kitchen table and—”

“Bye, Hannah.”

“Wait,” Sadie says, “we haven’t heard the ending!”

“You guys are shit friends and I’m not sure why I love you so much.” I hang up on them, laughing despite myself. I toss my phone away and get up to refill my glass of wine, thinking that when Hannah and Sadie fall for

someone I'll tease them mercilessly and make up fake stories about fake people, and then they'll know how it feels, to be—

"Mara."

Liam is standing in the entrance of the living room, necktie in one hand, looking tired and handsome and tall and—

Oh shit. "Liam?"

"Hi."

"W-when did you get here?"

"Just now."

"Oh." *Thank fuck.* "How was your . . . The interview, how did it go?"

"Good, I think."

"Oh. Good."

He just got here, he said. He can't have possibly overheard me. I haven't said anything compromising in the past few seconds. And Hannah's knockoff fairy tale used different names.

Why is he staring at me like that, then?

"When will you know if you got the job?"

He shrugs. "A few days, I assume." He cut his hair last week. Not too short, but shorter than it ever was. Sometimes—often—I'll see him in a certain light, or I'll catch him making one of those faces that I'm sure he doesn't let anyone else see, and my breath will hitch from the wonder of it.

"Are you hungry? I made a stir-fry. There's leftovers."

He studies me and says nothing.

"No carrots. I promise." What will I do with all this knowledge I have of his likes and dislikes? This knowledge of *him*? Where will it go once he's not in my life anymore?

"I'm not hungry, but thanks."

"Okay." I walk around the couch, looking for something to do with myself, and lean against the doorjamb. Just a few feet away from him. "I think I've found a place. To move, I mean."

"You have?" Unreadable, his expression.

"Yeah. But I won't know till a few days from now."

Silence. And a long, thoughtful stare.

“I still won’t sell my half. Sorry, I know you want to buy me out, but—”

“I don’t.”

I frown. “What do you mean, you don’t?”

“I don’t.”

I laugh. “Liam, you’ve been offering to buy me out for a million years.”

His mouth quirks. “A million years ago the house didn’t exist and this place was a swamp, but it’s not as if you’re an environmental scientist and could possibly know—”

“Oh, shut up. All I’m saying is, for a long time . . .” Though, now that I think about it, his lawyer hasn’t emailed me in . . . weeks. Months, maybe? “Oh my God. Liam, are you broke?” I lean forward. “Is it the stock market? Have you gambled away all your money? Have you bet the entirety of your savings on the U.S. male soccer team winning the World Cup and only belatedly realized that they didn’t even qualify? Have you become involved in a LuLaRoe pyramid scheme and can’t stop buying new leggings—”

“Are you drunk?”

“No. Well, I had some of your wine. A lot. Why?”

“You get annoying when you’re drunk.” There’s a hint of a smile in his eyes. “But cute.”

I stick my tongue out. “You’re annoying all the time.” *And cute, too.*

Liam’s smile widens a little, and he looks down at his feet. Then: “Good night, Mara.” He turns around and heads for his room. The yellow light of the lamp casts a warm, golden glow over the breadth of his shoulders.

“By the way,” I call after him, “I bought a new creamer. It’s cinnamon. You’ll hate it!”

Liam doesn’t answer and doesn’t pause on his way out. I don’t see him until the following night, and that . . .

That’s when it happens.

Chapter 13

Present

The weirdest part is how quickly everything changes.

One minute, I'm in the middle of cleaning up the kitchen, wondering whether the smoothie blender is dishwasher safe, thinking about my ongoing pining and my upcoming move, about how much I'll miss this—coming home after work, finding twelve forks and a colander in the sink, wondering how many of them are Liam's.

The next, he is standing behind me. Liam Harding is standing right behind me, on *purpose*, and pressing me into the counter. As though he *wants* to be here, close, touching me, as much as I want him to be. I am too stupefied to do anything about the water running in the kitchen, but he leans forward to turn it off, and all of sudden the room is silent.

His hand closes around my hip, and I cannot think. I cannot comprehend what is happening. I'm breathing. He's breathing. We're breathing together—same rhythm, same air—and for a moment I just feel it. This. It's nice. It's good. It's what I've been wanting.

Then he shifts my hair behind my shoulder; uncovers the base of my throat. I feel something—teeth, maybe?—grazing at my skin.

"Liam?" I half moan.

"It's me." He is kissing me. There. "Is this okay?"

I'm nodding—*Yes*—to what, I don't know. *Yes, you're Liam. Yes, this is okay. Yes, I'm about to melt to the floor.*

"You smell so good, Mara."

Thank God for the kitchen sink to hold on to, because my knees are about to give out. Thank God for Liam's hands, too. Except that one is

sliding under my shirt. I've never thought of myself as dainty, but it somehow manages to cover my entire torso, and his thumb . . .

It's brushing against the underside of my breast, and—

Oh.

He licks the pulse in the dip of my throat, and I'm mortified to hear myself whimper.

"You are so soft." His breath is hot in my ear, and I shiver. Exactly once. "I think I imagined you wouldn't be. You're always running, working out. You always look so strong, but . . ."

He lets go of me for a fraction of a second, and every single cell in my body revolts at once.

No.

Wait.

Stay.

But he's only adjusting me. His hand presses on my lower back, angling me just so: slightly bent forward, like . . . God, like he's about to—

He's back on me immediately. Begins to undo the zipper of my jeans, the catch of it like a drum in the silence. Air rushes out of my lungs in a sharp exhale.

"Okay?" he asks again, soft, deafening, and it *is* okay. Even if my jeans are sliding down my thighs, and I have never, ever felt less in control. I think we're about to have sex, but sex is *not* like this. Sex is awkwardly pulling off clothes, and negotiating positions, and hours of foreplay peppered with *Are you sure you shouldn't be on top?* and *Wait, that's my elbow*. Sex is not going from zero to a million this way. Not for me. It's not gripping the edge of the sink to stop myself from moaning, or needing to grind against something—anything—or feeling my knees weaken to jelly.

"Is this what you wanted, Mara?" He slides a finger under my panties and parts my folds. One single finger. "What you— *Oh*."

For a moment, I panic. I cannot possibly be wet, not yet. But then I realize that I am, and I can feel it and hear it, the slick slide of skin against skin, my own body already beginning to flutter.

And Liam makes it clear that he likes it. “You,” he grunts into my ear. “You wouldn’t believe it, the things I’ve thought about doing.”

“The . . . ?”

“Is this how you wanted it?”

“Wanted . . . what?”

“You said you wanted to be fucked. Hard and fast.” Did I say that? I can’t recall. I can’t remember my own name, and then things get even worse: behind me, he goes on his knees. What is he—? “Off.” Liam tugs at my jeans and panties until they’re pooling around my ankles, then tosses them on the other side of the room once I’ve stepped out of them. “Good girl.”

I gasp. Did he just say that? To me? But I can’t ask him to repeat himself, since he clearly got a little distracted on his way up. His hand travels along my inner thigh, long fingers grip the soft skin of my backside. It occurs to me in that moment that I am now bare. Completely naked except for a flimsy T-shirt and an even flimsier bra. And that this person softly biting into the flesh of my ass as though I am a piece of ripe fruit, this person is Liam Harding.

Liam. Harding. Who touches me as though he already knows my body. Who spreads me apart like I’m a law school book and buries his face into me. Who groans into my flesh and mutters, “Sorry.” He manages to sound genuinely apologetic as he pulls back to lick and suck the skin of my right buttock. “I know you want it hard and fast. Just, I think about this a lot. About you.” A heartbeat, and he’s on his feet again, chest pressed against my back. One hand tightens sweetly around my hip, and he pushes a knee between my legs, until most of my weight is resting on his thigh. I hear vaguely obscene sounds: something clinking, something fumbling, something being shoved aside. Then it’s hot flesh pushing against mine and a murmured, “Okay?” that I must have nodded to, because—

Friction.

My vision blurs around the edges. Liam is inside me. Barely. Just the tip. He’s also enormous—no room, *no room*—relentless, lovely, magnificent. *Deep*.

“Fuck, Mara. This is *unreal*.”

There’s a lot of harsh breathing, and “Just a bit more,” and tight muscles clenching and releasing, but he bottoms out, and it’s just this side of too much. It *would* be too much, but it helps that Liam holds on to me like letting go would kill him, or that his fingers are unsteady as he pushes my hair away from my shoulder. But my body seems to be into this, unused, hidden spaces stuffed full, fluttering around . . . God.

Around Liam’s cock.

“I can’t think when you’re around.” His voice is rough. He holds still inside me, as though he’s in no hurry to start, but I can feel him vibrate with tension. The heel of his palm slides down to rest against my clit. “I can’t think when you’re *not* around. It’s been a problem. I feel like I haven’t formulated a coherent thought in months. I feel like you won’t stop being in my head, and—”

Just like that, it’s all over. Liam hasn’t even moved yet, but my mind goes blank. The world recedes and I start coming without warning, arching against him, biting into my lip to silence a scream. Pleasure sinks into me, and I’m helpless to stop it.

I don’t know how long passes before I’m back to myself, his breath sharp in my ear. “Did you just—?” Liam sounds in pain. “Did you really come, just from me . . .”

I’m dazed. My nerve endings are still tingling. I shut my eyes tight and nod my embarrassment just as his teeth close around the fleshy part of my shoulder. He grunts like an animal, like he’s desperate to keep whatever control he can.

“Fuck, Mara, you . . . can I take you to bed?”

His tone is unlike anything I’ve ever heard from him, pleading and a little raw. He’s still twitching inside me; every few seconds or so he seems to lose whatever grip he has on himself and rolls his hips. It doesn’t help my focus. Or his focus. *Our* focus.

Which we maybe should keep. This should stop right now, maybe. As good as it’s been—and it has just redefined sex for me—I’m not quite sure why Liam wants this, and if it’s just some impromptu fucking that means

nothing to him but has lots of heartbreak in store for me . . . Maybe we should stop here?

“I’ll try to keep it fast.” He’s licking away the sting of his earlier bite. “But let me take you to bed.”

The thing is, I don’t want to stop. I’ve come once, already, just from him sliding into me and stretching me too tight, from the feel of his hand clutching my hip bone—a small miracle in and of itself, because it usually takes me *forever*. But if I let him take me to bed, he’s going to wreck me. He is going to ruin me for anyone else. He is going to destroy me in each and every possible way.

“Please,” he murmurs.

I don’t really have a choice: I want to say yes, so I nod. *Whatever you want, you can have, Liam.*

It’s not pretty, when he pulls out. He gasps a breath of pure frustration and it’s clear that he hates it. I hate it, too, and I’m the one who just had a life-altering orgasm. Liam’s the one who gave it to me and took very little for himself—which doesn’t even come as a surprise.

I wouldn’t have fallen for an unkind man.

He takes my top and bra off, and I’m too stupid with aftershocks of pleasure to do anything but stand there and let him, watch him stare his fill with dark, unreadable eyes, even though I’m completely naked and my belly button is still an outie and the lacrosse scar is there, gleaming white in the dim lights of the room.

“Come here. Mara, you . . . Fuck. Come here.” His jaw is tense as he picks me up and carries me to his room. My first time here, but I know this place—because I know Liam. Dark colors. Framed pictures of semihostile nature from the trips he told me about. Sparse furniture. A stack of books on his bedside table. Reading glasses, the ones I tease him about, unfolded in the middle of his desk. I want to explore every corner, but there’s no time. The mattress bounces underneath my back, and then he’s taking up my entire field of view.

“Can I kiss you?” His mouth is hovering a few inches above mine, so I press my hands down his nape and arch into him, kissing him myself.

It’s slow, and warm, and achingly careful. He was fucking me less than a minute ago. He was so deep inside me that I felt deliciously split in two. But now there’s this gentle sliding of lips and tongues, Liam nibbling on me, holding first my chin, then the back of my head, and my heart sings for him.

I am catastrophically, ruinously in love with you.

“I love kissing you,” I sigh in his mouth.

“Mara.” His lips. His voice. “I want to kiss you everywhere.” He moves back, as if something occurs to him just then. “Can I go down on you?”

I feel my cheeks heat. Does he really want to?

“Just for a minute,” he adds, and then . . . Incredible, how he’s waiting for my answer. He just bent me over the kitchen sink and slid into me and made me come on his cock, but he’s asking for permission to eat me out like I’d be doing *him* a favor.

“Are you sure?”

“Thirty seconds. Please.”

“Yes. I mean, if . . . if you’re sure that you— Oh.”

He’s very good at it. Not . . . Maybe not deftly skilled, but he is completely lost to it, so thorough, so noisy in his utter, amazed enjoyment of the act, of me. My hips arch and he has to hold me down, carry me through the pleasure. It lasts more than thirty seconds. It lasts more than three minutes, maybe more than ten—but my thighs are trembling and my pussy spasms and I start to come like an ocean wave, and when I think the pleasure is finally subsiding he slides two fingers inside me and my hips buck up, because it’s not over. My entire world is spinning. I’ve officially had more orgasms in the past twenty minutes than in the last year.

Fingers still inside me, he looks up, eyes soft and earnest and swallowed by his pupils. “Thank you.”

Oh. “I think . . .” I clear my throat. My voice remains scratchy. “Maybe I should be the one thanking you.”

He shakes his head and lifts himself over me, balanced on one arm, and my eyes widen. He strokes himself with the other hand while staring down at my breasts with an awestruck expression. “This is so good, Mara. You

are so good. Why do you want it to be fast?" He leans forward to kiss me again, licking the inside of my mouth, nibbling down my throat. "I just want to make it last," he rasps against my skin.

I have no idea what he's referring to. I don't want this to be fast. I've never said I did, but he keeps telling me that . . .

Except that I *did* say it. Shit, I did say it. Just not to *him*. "You heard me."

Liam is preoccupied. Licking one of my nipples. Biting gently. Licking again. Doing a *fantastic* job.

"You heard me," I repeat. I twine my finger in his hair to slow him down. "On the phone."

He stops, but doesn't lift his head. His breath, warm against my breast, has me shivering. "Remember when I found you in my bathroom? I haven't stopped thinking about your tits ever since—"

"Liam, you heard me tell my friends about . . ." He's currently busy sucking on the underside of my breast, but for some reason I cannot bring myself to repeat the words. "About what I wanted you to do. You heard me."

He looks up. He's flushed, turned on, and more beautiful than ever. "I can do it, Mara. I can do it for you. What you want."

"I don't—" This is mortifying. I push him away, but he barely budges. "If this is some kind of charity, I don't need a pity fuck. I am perfectly capable of—"

He takes my palm and drags it down his chest, past his abdomen, until his cock is hot in my hand. He is massive, and almost automatically my fingers close around him. Liam grimaces, biting his lower lip, and I have the sudden realization that he's been touching me in all sorts of manners, but I haven't touched him yet, not at all. It seems sad, and unfair, and unbearably stupid. Something to remedy.

"Does this feel like I'm giving you a pity fuck?"

No. No, it definitely does not. But. "I don't know."

Of its own free will, my hand starts moving up and down his length, simple strokes that have him gasping and shutting his eyes. His lips part as I

circle around the damp head with my thumb. The arm he's leaning on shakes. Visibly.

"Come on, Mara." His hips are thrusting, now. In and out of my fist. He's getting closer. Closer to something. "You must know."

"Know what?"

"How hard it's been, to—*fuck*—to keep my hands off you. How much I've wanted this, almost since the very beginning."

Oh.

Oh *God*.

His eyes are glazed, muscles taut. He is on the verge of coming, that much is obvious. So obvious that I'm shocked when his fingers wrap around my wrist to stop me.

"Please, let me fuck you. Let me give you what you need. Let me try, at least." He kisses a spot under my jaw. "Hard and fast."

I'm not about to tell him no. I'm not about to tell *myself* no. Instead I smile and pull him on top of me, arms twined around his neck as I silently mouth against the flesh of his shoulder how much I like him, how much I love this, and Liam adjusts us and angles himself until he's almost inside again, hot and wet and . . . the most annoying thought occurs to me. *Shit*.

"Condom! We need—do you—?"

Liam groans. "*Fuck*." His biceps are shaking, fingers white as they fist in the sheets. Then he takes a deep breath and shifts, rearranging until he can slide one finger—two—deep inside me, curling them upward so that he is thrumming exactly where I need him.

"What are you—?" God, this feels insanely good.

"I don't have any condoms." His words are a bit slurred. "I'm just going to make you come like this and then get myself off." He sounds like he's doing the single hardest thing in his life, and yet it's clear that he's absolutely fine with it. Which . . . No. No, no, no, *no*.

"Liam, are you—*Ah*—are you clean?" His thumb brushes my clit. I moan. "Because I'm on the pill, and . . ."

"I have no idea."

How does he not know? I reach down to hold his forearm still. Problem is, he can still curve his fingers. His long, beautiful fingers.

"Have you been tested, since the last time you . . . ?"

I brace for all sorts of horrifying answers, ranging from *Why, of course not, my last one-night stand was yesterday*, to *Everyone has HPV, anyway*. But what comes is, "I've had a bunch of yearly physicals for work. I—Mara, it doesn't matter." He kisses me on the cheek, and a clever twist of his wrist makes my brain go blank. "I think I can make you come with my fingers. That's safe. And you don't have to be around later, when I . . ."

Yearly physicals? *Plural?* "When was the last time you had sex? Can you—*ah*, please, please stop that."

"I have no idea." Liam pulls out his fingers. For a second, the friction is distracting. Then my pussy clenches in protest. "I don't have sex, Mara."

"You . . . You what?"

He looks away. We are both breathing too hard. "I don't like sex."

I look down. He is so hard. His cock is so heavy on my thigh. There is pre-come on my skin. "You seem to . . . um, you seem to like it fine."

"Yeah. But I really don't. It's just . . ." He holds my eyes. His are a dark, beautiful brown. "I like *you* very much, Mara. I like talking to you. I like watching you do yoga. I like the way you always smell like sunscreen. I like how you manage to say pretty much whatever you want while still being unbelievably kind. I like being in this house with you, and everything we do in here." His throat bobs. "I don't think it's a surprise that I really, *really* like the idea of fucking you."

Oh my God. Oh my God oh my God oh my God—

"But I don't need to . . . I'm enjoying this"—he grimaces, as if appalled by the understatement—"maybe too much, since I almost lost it . . . a number of times, just by being near you, so I'll be more than fine if you just let me take care of you and—"

No.

I push at his shoulder, his chest, and then keep pushing through his first resigned, then confused, then shocked expression. Once his back is on the mattress, he lets me straddle his hips and groans. "What are you doing?"

I lean over and whisper in his ear, “Hard and fast, Liam.”

There is a long moment in which he just stares up at me, disoriented. Then he must realize: we are perfectly lined up. I’m working to take him inside, struggling a little, because he’s so *big* this way. But I’m moving now, balancing my palms on his chest, up and down and up again, and a few minutes later, on the downstroke, he’s completely wedged inside me.

The angle is so deep, my vision spots. Liam’s grip digs almost painfully around my waist.

“Mara.” He is panting. “I’m not going to be able to pull out.”

“It’s fine.” It’s *perfect*. “Just do what feels good.”

Everything does, anyway. The slide of flesh, the wet friction—even within the clumsy mess of our movements, as he slips out and has to nudge himself back in, this feels like perfection. The way he stares at my face, my breasts, the rise and fall of my hips, looking stunned; the wet, filthy sounds of us moving together; the things he says about how beautiful I am, how precious, about all the times he has imagined doing this—and there are so many.

I feel my pulse spike, and I smile at him as I lean forward. *I love you*, I think. *And I suspect that you love me, too. And I cannot wait for us to admit it to each other. I cannot wait to see what happens next.*

“I think,” he grunts against my throat. “Mara, I think I’m going to come now.”

I nod, too close to speak, and let him roll us over.

* * *

“Well. That was certainly fast.” Liam hasn’t caught his breath yet. His tone is mildly self-deprecating.

“Yup.” Delicious. It was *delicious*.

“I can do better,” he says. I’m pretty sure he has no clue that this *was* better. Best. Ever. “I think. Maybe with practice.”

I’m not even sure it’s over yet. My nerve endings are still twitching. My entire body is flooded with an electric sort of pleasure, wrenched out of me and then poured back in again. “It wasn’t *that* fast,” I say.

Liam buries his face in my neck and curls around me, dwarfing me. Yeah. It *was* fast.

“I mean,” I mumble against his chest, “that it wasn’t *too* fast. It was . . .” Extraordinary. Spectacular. Transcendent. “Good. Very good.” He presses a kiss to my throat, and I add, “But it wasn’t that hard, either.”

He tenses. “I’m sorry. Do you—”

“That is to say, we should do it again.” He pulls back to meet my eyes. He looks very, *very* serious. I’m feeling considerably less so. “And again. And again. Until we get it right. Perfectly hard, and perfectly fast. You know?”

His smile unfurls slowly. “Yeah?” Hopeful and happy, he looks younger than ever. I grin and pull him in for a kiss.

“Yeah, Liam.”

Epilogue

Six months later

“Who puts coffee creamer in their smoothies, anyway?”

“People.”

“No way.”

“Plenty of people.”

“Name one.”

“Me.”

I roll my eyes. “Name two.”

Silence.

“See?”

Liam sighs. “It doesn’t mean anything, Mara. Normal people don’t have conversations about coffee creamer.”

“You and I certainly do. Hazelnut or vanilla?”

“Vanilla.”

I put two bottles in the cart. Then I push up on my toes and plant a kiss on Liam’s mouth, short and hard. Liam follows me for a bit when I step back, as if reluctant to let me go.

“Okay.” I smile. Lately, I’m always smiling. “What else?”

Liam browses the list I wrote earlier today, sitting between his thighs while he was busy killing bad guys on the PlayStation. He squints a little at my terrible handwriting, and I try not to laugh. “I think we’re done. Unless you need a few more family-size Cheez-It boxes?”

I stick my tongue out at him. My hand falls to my side, until it’s brushing against his. He starts pushing the shopping cart and twines our fingers together. “Ready to go?” he asks.

“Yeah.” I beam. “Let’s go home.”

Don’t miss

Love on the Brain

coming soon from Berkley Jove!

“By the way, you can get leprosy from armadillos.”

I peel my nose away from the airplane window and glance at Rocío, my research assistant. “Really?”

“Yep. They got it from humans millennia ago, and now they’re giving it back to us.” She shrugs. “Revenge and cold dishes and all that.”

I scrutinize her beautiful face for hints that she’s lying. Her large dark eyes, heavily rimmed with eyeliner, are inscrutable. Her hair is so Vantablack, it absorbs 99 percent of visible light. Her mouth is full, curved downward in its typical pout.

Nope. I got nothing. “Is this for real?”

“Would I ever lie to you?”

“Last week you swore to me that Stephen King was writing a Winnie-the-Pooh spin-off.” And I believed her. Like I believed that Lady Gaga is a known satanist, or that badminton racquets are made from human bones and intestines. Chaotic goth misanthropy and creepy deadpan sarcasm are her brand, and I should know better than to take her seriously. Problem is, every once in a while she’ll throw in a crazy-sounding story that upon further inspection (i.e., a Google search) is revealed to be true. For instance, did you know that the *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* was inspired by a true story? Before Rocío, I didn’t. And I slept significantly better.

“Don’t believe me, then.” She shrugs, going back to her grad school admission prep book. “Go pet the leper armadillos and die.”

She’s such a weirdo. I adore her.

“Hey, you sure you’re going to be fine, away from Alex for the next few months?” I feel a little guilty for taking her away from her boyfriend. When I was twenty-two, if someone had asked me to be apart from Tim for months, I’d have walked into the sea. Then again, hindsight has proven beyond doubt that I was a complete idiot, and Rocío seems pretty enthused for the opportunity. She plans to apply to Johns Hopkins’s neuro program in the fall, and the NASA line on her CV won’t hurt. She even hugged me when I invited her to come along—a moment of weakness I’m sure she deeply regrets.

“Fine? Are you kidding?” She looks at me like I’m insane. “Three months in Texas, do you know how many times I’ll get to see La Llorona?”

“La . . . what?”

She rolls her eyes and pops in her AirPods. “You really know *nothing* about famed feminist ghosts.”

I bite back a smile and turn back to the window. In 1905, Dr. Curie decided to invest her Nobel Prize money into hiring her first research assistant. I wonder if she, too, ended up working with a mildly terrifying, Cthulhu-worshipping emo girl. I stare at the clouds until I’m bored, and then I take my phone out of my pocket and connect to the complimentary in-flight Wi-Fi. I glance at Rocío, making sure that she’s not paying attention to me, and angle my screen away.

I’m not a very secretive person, mostly out of laziness: I refuse to take on the cognitive labor of tracking lies and omissions. I do, however, have one secret. One single piece of information that I’ve never shared with anyone—not even my sister. Don’t get me wrong, I trust Reike with my life, but I also know her well enough to picture the scene: she is wearing a flowy sundress and flirting with a Scottish shepherd she met in a trattoria on the Amalfi Coast. They decide to do the shrooms they just purchased from a Belarusian farmer, and mid-trip she accidentally blurts out the one thing she’s been expressly forbidden to repeat: her twin sister, Bee, runs one of

the most popular and controversial accounts on Academic Twitter. The Scottish shepherd's cousin is a closeted men's rights activist who sends me a dead possum in the mail and rats me out to his insane friends, and I get fired.

No, thank you. I love my job (and possums) too much for this.

I created @WhatWouldMarieDo during my first semester of grad school. I was teaching a neuroanatomy class and decided to give my students an anonymous mid-semester survey to ask for honest feedback on how to improve the course. What I got was . . . not that. I was told that my lectures would be more interesting if I delivered them naked. That I should gain some weight, get a boob job, stop dying my hair "unnatural colors," get rid of my piercings. I was even given a phone number to call if I was "ever in the mood for a ten-inch dick." (Yeah, right.)

The messages were pretty appalling, but what sent me sobbing in a bathroom stall was the reactions of the other students in my cohort—Tim included. They laughed the comments off as harmless pranks and dissuaded me from reporting them to the department chair, telling me that I'd be making a stink about nothing.

They were, of course, all men.

(Seriously: Why *are* men?)

That night I fell asleep crying. The following day, I got up, wondered how many other women in STEM felt as alone as I did, and impulsively downloaded Twitter and made @WhatWouldMarieDo. I slapped on a poorly photoshopped pic of Dr. Curie wearing sunglasses and a one-line bio: *Making the periodic table girlier since 1889 (she/her).* I just wanted to scream into the void. I honestly didn't think that anyone would even see my first Tweet. But I was wrong.

> @WhatWouldMarieDo What would Dr. Curie, first female professor at La Sorbonne, do if one of her students asked her to deliver her lectures naked?

@198888 She would shorten his half-life.

@annahhhh RAT HIM OUT TO PIERRE!!!

@emily89 Put some polonium in his pants and watch his dick shrivel.

@bioworm55 Nuke him NUKE HIM

@lucyinthesea Has this happened to you? God I'm so sorry. Once a student said something about my ass and it was so gross and no one believed me.

Over half a decade later, after a handful of *Chronicle of Higher Education* nods, a *New York Times* article, and about a million followers, WWMD is my happy place. What's best is, I think the same is true for many others. The account has evolved into a therapeutic community of sorts, used by women in STEM to tell their stories, exchange advice, and . . . bitch.

Oh, we bitch. We bitch a lot, and it's glorious.

@BiologySarah Hey, @WhatWouldMarieDo if she weren't given authorship on a project that was originally her idea and that she worked on for over one year? All other authors are men, because *of course* they are.

"Yikes." I scrunch my face and quote-tweet Sarah.

Marie would slip some radium in their coffee. Also, she would consider reporting this to her institution's Office of

Research Integrity, making sure to document every step of the process ♥

I hit send, drum my fingers on the armrest, and wait. My answers are not the main attraction of the account, not in the least. The real reason people reach out to WWMD is . . .

Yep. This. I feel my grin widen as the replies start coming in.

@DrAllixx This happened to me, too. I was the only woman and only POC in the author lineup and my name suddenly disappeared during revisions. DM if u want to chat, Sarah.

@AmyBernard I am a member of the Women in Science Association, and we have advice for situations like this on our website (they're sadly common)!

@TheGeologician Going through the same situation rn @BiologySarah. I did report it to ORI and it's still unfolding but I'm happy to talk if you need to vent.

@SteveHarrison Dude, breaking news: you're lying to yourself. Your contributions aren't VALUABLE enough to warrant authorship. Your team did you a favor letting you tag along for a while but if you're not smart enough, you're OUT. Not everything is about being a woman, sometimes you're just A LOSER

It is a truth universally acknowledged that a community of women trying to mind their own business must be in want of a random man's opinion.

I've long learned that engaging with basement-dwelling STEMlords who come online looking for a fight is never a good idea—the last thing I

want is to provide free entertainment for their fragile egos. If they want to blow off some steam, they can buy a gym membership or play third-person-shooter video games. Like normal people.

I make to hide @SteveHarrison's delightful contribution but notice that someone has replied to him.

> @Shmacademics Yeah, Marie, sometimes you're just a loser. Steve would know.

I chuckle.

> @WhatWouldMarieDo Aw, Steve. Don't be too hard on yourself.

> @Shmacademics He is just a boy, standing in front of a girl, asking her to do twice as much work as he ever did in order to prove that she's worthy of becoming a scientist.

> @WhatWouldMarieDo Steve, you old romantic.

> @SteveHarrison Fuck you. This ridiculous push for women in STEM is ruining STEM. People should get jobs because they're good NOT BECAUSE THEY HAVE VAGINAS. But now people feel like they have to hire women and they get jobs over men who are MORE QUALIFIED. This is the end of STEM AND IT'S WRONG.

> @WhatWouldMarieDo I can see you're upset about this, Steve.

> @Shmacademics There, there.

Steve blocks both of us, and I chuckle again, drawing a curious glance from Rocío. @Shmacademics is another hugely popular account on Academic Twitter, and by far my favorite. He mostly tweets about how he should be writing, makes fun of elitism and ivory-tower academics, and points out bad or biased science. I was initially a bit distrustful of him—his bio says "he/him," and we all know how cis men on the internet can be. But he and I ended up forming an alliance of sorts. When the STEMlords take offense at the sheer idea of women in STEM and start pitchforking in my mentions, he helps me ridicule them a little. I'm not sure when we started direct messaging, when I stopped being afraid that he was secretly a retired Gamergater out to doxx me, or when I began considering him a friend. But a handful of years later, here we are, chatting about half a dozen different things a couple of times a week, without having even exchanged real names. Is it weird, knowing that Shmac had lice three times in second grade but not which time zone he lives in? A bit. But it's also liberating. Plus, having opinions online can be very dangerous. The internet is a sea full of creepy, cybercriminal fish, and if Mark Zuckerberg can cover his laptop webcam with a piece of tape, I reserve the right to keep things painfully anonymous.

The flight attendant offers me a glass of water from a tray. I shake my head, smile, and DM Shmac.

Marie: I think Steve doesn't want to play with us anymore.

Shmac: I think Steve wasn't held enough as a tadpole.

Marie: Lol!

Shmac: How's life?

Marie: Good! Cool new project starting next week. My ticket away from my gross boss

Shmac: I hope so. Can't believe dude's still around.

Marie: The power of connections. And inertia. What about you?

Shmac: Work's interesting.

Marie: Good interesting?

Shmac: Politicky interesting. So, no.

Marie: I'm afraid to ask. How's the rest?

Shmac: Weird.

Marie: Did your cat poop in your shoe again?

Shmac: No, but I did find a tomato in my boot the other day.

Marie: Send pics next time! What's going on?

Shmac: Nothing, really.

Marie: Oh, come on!

Shmac: How do you even know something's going on?

Marie: Your lack of exclamation points!

Shmac: !!!!!!!11!!1!!!!!

Marie: Shmac.

Shmac: FYI, I'm sighing deeply.

Marie: I bet. Tell me!

Shmac: It's a girl.

Marie: Ooooh! Tell me EVERYTHING!!!!!!!11!!1!!!!!

Shmac: There isn't much to tell.

Marie: Did you just meet her?

Shmac: No. She's someone I've known for a long time, and now she's back.

Shmac: And she is married.

Marie: To you?

Shmac: Depressingly, no.

Shmac: Sorry—we're restructuring the lab. Gotta go before someone destroys a 5 mil piece of equipment. Talk later.

Marie: Sure, but I'll want to know everything about your affair with a married woman

Shmac: I wish.

It’s nice to know that Shmac is always a click away, especially now that I’m flying into the Wardass’s frosty, unwelcoming lap.

I switch to my email app to check if Levi has finally answered the email I sent three days ago. It was just a couple of lines—*Hey, long time no see, I look forward to working together again, would you like to meet to discuss BLINK this weekend?*—but he must have been too busy to reply. Or too full of contempt. Or both.

Ugh.

I lean back against the headrest and close my eyes, wondering how Dr. Curie would deal with Levi Ward. She’d probably hide some radioactive isotopes in his pockets, grab popcorn, and watch nuclear decay work its magic.

Yep, sounds about right.

After a few minutes, I fall asleep. I dream that Levi is part armadillo: his skin glows a faint, sallow green, and he’s digging a tomato out of his boot with an expensive piece of equipment. Even with all of that, the weirdest thing about him is that he’s finally being nice to me.

WE’RE PUT UP in small furnished apartments in a lodging facility just outside the Johnson Space Center, only a couple of minutes from the Sullivan Discovery Building, where we’ll be working. I can’t believe how short my commute is going to be.

“Bet you’ll still manage to be late all the time,” Rocío tells me, and I glare at her while unlocking my door. It’s not my fault if I’ve spent a sizable chunk of my formative years in Italy, where time is but a polite suggestion.

The place is considerably nicer than the apartment I rent—maybe because of the raccoon incident, probably because I buy 90 percent of my furniture from the as-is bargain corner at Ikea. It has a balcony, a dishwasher, and—huge improvement on my quality of life—a toilet that flushes 100 percent of the times I push the lever. Truly paradigm shifting. I excitedly open and close every single cupboard (they’re all empty; I’m not sure what I expected), take pictures to send Reike and my coworkers, stick

my favorite Marie Curie magnet to the fridge (a picture of her holding a beaker that says “I’m pretty rad”), hang my hummingbird feeder on the balcony, and then . . .

It’s still only two-thirty p.m. Ugh.

Not that I’m one of those people who hates having free time. I could easily spend five solid hours napping, rewatching an entire season of *The Office* while eating Twizzlers, or moving to step 2 of the couch-to-5K plan I’m still very . . . okay, *sort of* committed to. But I am here! In Houston! Near the Space Center! About to start the coolest project of my life!

It’s Friday, and I’m not due to check in until Monday, but I’m brimming with nervous energy. So I text Rocío to ask whether she wants to check out the Space Center with me (*No*.) or to grab dinner together (*I only eat animal carcasses*.).

She’s so mean. I love her.

My first impression of Houston is: big. Closely followed by: humid, and then by: humidly big. In Maryland, remnants of snow still cling to the ground, but the Space Center is already lush and green, a mix of open spaces and large buildings and old NASA aircraft on display. There are families visiting, which reminds me a little of an amusement park. I can’t believe I’m going to be seeing rockets on my way to work for the next three months. It sure beats the perv crossing guard who works on the NIH campus.

The Discovery Building is on the outskirts of the center. It’s wide, futuristic, and three-storied, with glass walls and a complicated-looking stair system I can’t quite figure out. I step inside the marble hall, wondering if my new office will have a window. I’m not used to natural light; the sudden intake of vitamin D might kill me.

“I’m Bee Königswasser.” I smile at the receptionist. “I’m starting work here on Monday, and I was wondering if I could take a look around?”

He gives me an apologetic smile. “I can’t let you in if you don’t have an ID badge. The engineering labs are upstairs—high-security areas.”

Right. Yes. The engineering labs. Levi’s labs. He’s probably up there, hard at work. Engineering. Labbing. Not answering my emails.

“No problem, that’s understandable. I’ll just—”

“Dr. Königswasser? Bee?”

I turn around. There is a blond young man behind me. He’s nonthreateningly handsome, medium height, smiling at me like we’re old friends even though he doesn’t look familiar. “ . . . Hi?”

“I didn’t mean to eavesdrop, but I caught your name, and . . . I’m Guy. Guy Kowalsky?”

The name clicks immediately. I break into a grin. “Guy! It’s so nice to meet you in person.” When I was first notified of BLINK, Guy was my point of contact for logistics questions, and he and I emailed back and forth a few times. He’s an astronaut—*an actual astronaut!*—working on BLINK while he’s grounded. He seemed so familiar with the project, I initially assumed he’d be my co-lead.

He shakes my hand warmly. “I love your work! I’ve read all your articles—you’ll be such an asset to the project.”

“Likewise. I can’t wait to collaborate.”

If I weren’t dehydrated from the flight, I’d probably tear up. I cannot believe that this man, this nice, pleasant man who has given me more positive interactions in one minute than Dr. Wardass did in one year, could have been my co-lead. I must have pissed off some god. Zeus? Eros? Must be Poseidon. Shouldn’t have peed in the Baltic Sea during my misspent youth.

“Why don’t I show you around? You can come in as my guest.” He nods to the receptionist and gestures at me to follow him.

“I wouldn’t want to take you away from . . . astronauting?”

“I’m between missions. Giving you a tour beats debugging any day.” He shrugs, something boyishly charming about him. We’ll get along great, I already know it.

“Have you lived in Houston long?” I ask as we step into the elevator.

“About eight years. Came to NASA right out of grad school. Applied for the Astronaut Corps, did the training, then a mission.” I do some math in my head. It would put him in his mid-thirties, older than I initially thought. “The past two or so, I worked on BLINK’s precursor. Engineering the

structure of the helmet, figuring out the wireless system. But we got to a point where we needed a neurostimulation expert on board." He gives me a warm smile.

"I cannot wait to see what we cook up together." I also cannot wait to find out why Levi was given the lead of this project over someone who has been on it for five years. It just seems unfair. To Guy *and* to me.

The elevator doors open, and he points to a quaint-looking café in the corner. "That place over there—amazing sandwiches, worst coffee in the world. You hungry?"

"No, thanks."

"You sure? It's on me. The egg sandwiches are almost as good as the coffee is bad."

"I don't really eat eggs."

"Let me guess, a vegan?"

I nod. I try hard to break the stereotypes that plague my people and not use the word "vegan" in my first three meetings with a new acquaintance, but if they're the ones to mention it, all bets are off.

"I should introduce you to my daughter. She recently announced that she won't eat animal products anymore." He sighs. "Last weekend I poured regular milk in her cereal figuring she wouldn't know the difference. She told me that her legal team will be in touch."

"How old is she?"

"Just turned six."

I laugh. "Good luck with that."

I stopped having meat at seven, when I realized that the delicious *pollo* nuggets my Sicilian grandmother served nearly every day and the cute *galline* grazing about the farm were more . . . connected than I originally suspected. Stunning plot twist, I know. Reike wasn't nearly as distraught: when I frantically explained that "Pigs have families, too. A mom and a dad and siblings that will miss them," she just nodded thoughtfully and said, "What you're saying is, we should eat the whole family?" I went fully vegan a couple of years later. Meanwhile, my sister has made it her life's

goal to eat enough animal products for two. Together we emit one normal person's carbon footprint.

"The engineering labs are down this hallway," Guy says. The space is an interesting mix of glass and wood, and I can see inside some of the rooms. "A bit cluttered, and most people are off today—we're shuffling around equipment and reorganizing the space. We've got lots of ongoing projects, but BLINK's everyone's favorite child. The other astronauts pop by every once in a while just to ask how much longer it will be until their fancy swag is ready."

I grin. "For real?"

"Yep."

Making fancy swag for astronauts is my literal job description. I can add it to my LinkedIn profile. Not that anyone uses LinkedIn.

"The neuroscience labs—your labs—will be on the right. This way there are—" His phone rings. "Sorry—mind if I take it?"

"Not at all." I smile at his beaver phone case ("Nature's Engineer") and look away.

I wonder whether Guy would think I'm lame if I snapped a few pictures of the building for my friends. I decide that I can live with that, but when I take out my phone, I hear a noise from down the hallway. It's soft and chirpy, and sounds a lot like a . . .

"Meow."

I glance back at Guy. He's busy explaining how to put on *Moana* to someone very young, so I decide to investigate. Most of the rooms are deserted, labs full of large, abstruse equipment that looks like it belongs to . . . well. NASA. I hear male voices somewhere in the building, but no sign of the—

"Meow."

I turn around. A few feet away, staring at me with a curious expression, is a beautiful young calico.

"And who might you be?" I slowly hold out my hand. The kitten comes closer, delicately sniffs my fingers, and gives me a welcoming headbutt.

I laugh. “You’re such a sweet girl.” I squat down to scratch her under her chin. She nips my finger, a playful love bite. “Aren’t you the most *purr*-fect little baby? I feel so *fur*-tunate to have met you.”

She gives me a disdainful look and turns away. I think she understands puns.

“Come on, I was just *kitten*.” Another outraged glare. Then she jumps on a nearby cart, piled ceiling-high with boxes and heavy, precarious-looking equipment. “Where are you going?”

I squint, trying to figure out where she disappeared, and that’s when I realize it. The piece of equipment? The precarious-looking one? It actually *is* precarious. And the cat poked it just enough to dislodge it. And it’s falling on my head.

Right.

About.

Now.

I have less than three seconds to move away. Which is too bad, because my entire body is suddenly made of stone, unresponsive to my brain’s commands. I stand there, terrified, paralyzed, and close my eyes as a jumbled chaos of thoughts twists through my head. *Is the cat okay? Am I going to die? Oh God, I* am *going to die. Squashed by a tungsten anvil like Wile E. Coyote. I am a twenty-first century Pierre Curie, about to get my skull crushed by a horse-drawn cart. Except that I have no chair in the physics department of the University of Paris to leave to my lovely spouse, Marie. Except that I have barely done a tenth of all the science I meant to do. Except that I wanted so many things and I never oh my God any second now—*

Something slams into my body, shoving me aside and into the wall.

Everything is pain.

For a couple of seconds. Then the pain is over, and everything is *noise*: metal clanking as it plunges to the floor, horrified screaming, a shrill “meow” somewhere in the distance, and, closer to my ear . . . someone is panting. Less than an inch from me.

I open my eyes, gasping for breath, and . . .

Green.

All I can see is green. Not dark, like the grass outside; not dull, like the pistachios I had on the plane. This green is light, piercing, intense. Familiar, but hard to place, not unlike—

Eyes. I'm looking up into the greenest eyes I've ever seen. Eyes that I've seen before. Eyes surrounded by wavy black hair and a face that's angles and sharp edges and full lips, a face that's offensively, imperfectly handsome. A face attached to a large, solid body—a body that is pinning me to the wall, a body made of a broad chest and two thighs that could moonlight as redwoods. Easily. One is slotted between my legs and it's holding me up. Unyielding. This man even smells like a forest—and *that mouth*. That mouth is still breathing heavily on top of me, probably from the effort of whisking me off from under seven hundred pounds of mechanical engineering tools, and—

I *know* that mouth.

Levi.

Levi.

I haven't seen Levi Ward in six years. Six blessed, blissful years. And now here he is, pushing me into a wall in the middle of NASA's Space Center, and he looks . . . he looks . . .

"Levi!" someone yells. The clanking goes silent. What was meant to fall has settled on the floor. "Are you okay?"

Levi doesn't move, nor does he look away. His mouth works, and so does his throat. His lips part to say something, but no sound comes out. Instead a hand, at once rushed and gentle, reaches up to cup my face. It's so large, I feel perfectly cradled. Engulfed in green, cozy warmth. I whimper when it leaves my skin, a plaintive, involuntary sound from deep in my throat, but I stop when I realize that it's only shifting to the back of my skull. To the hollow of my collarbone. To my brow, pushing back my hair.

It's a cautious touch. Pressing but delicate. Lingering but urgent. As though he is studying me. Trying to make sure that I'm all in one piece. Memorizing me.

I lift my eyes, and for the first time I notice the deep, unmasked concern in Levi's eyes.

His lips move, and I think that, maybe—is he mouthing my name? Once, and then again? Like it's some kind of prayer?

"Levi? Levi, is she—"

My eyelids fall closed, and everything goes dark.

Photo courtesy of the author

Ali Hazelwood is the *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Love Hypothesis*, as well as the writer of peer-reviewed articles about brain science, in which no one makes out and the ever after is not always happy. Originally from Italy, she lived in Germany and Japan before moving to the U.S. to pursue a Ph.D. in neuroscience. She recently became a professor, which absolutely terrifies her. When Ali is not at work, she can be found running, eating cake pops, or watching sci-fi movies with her two feline overlords (and her slightly-less-feline husband).

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